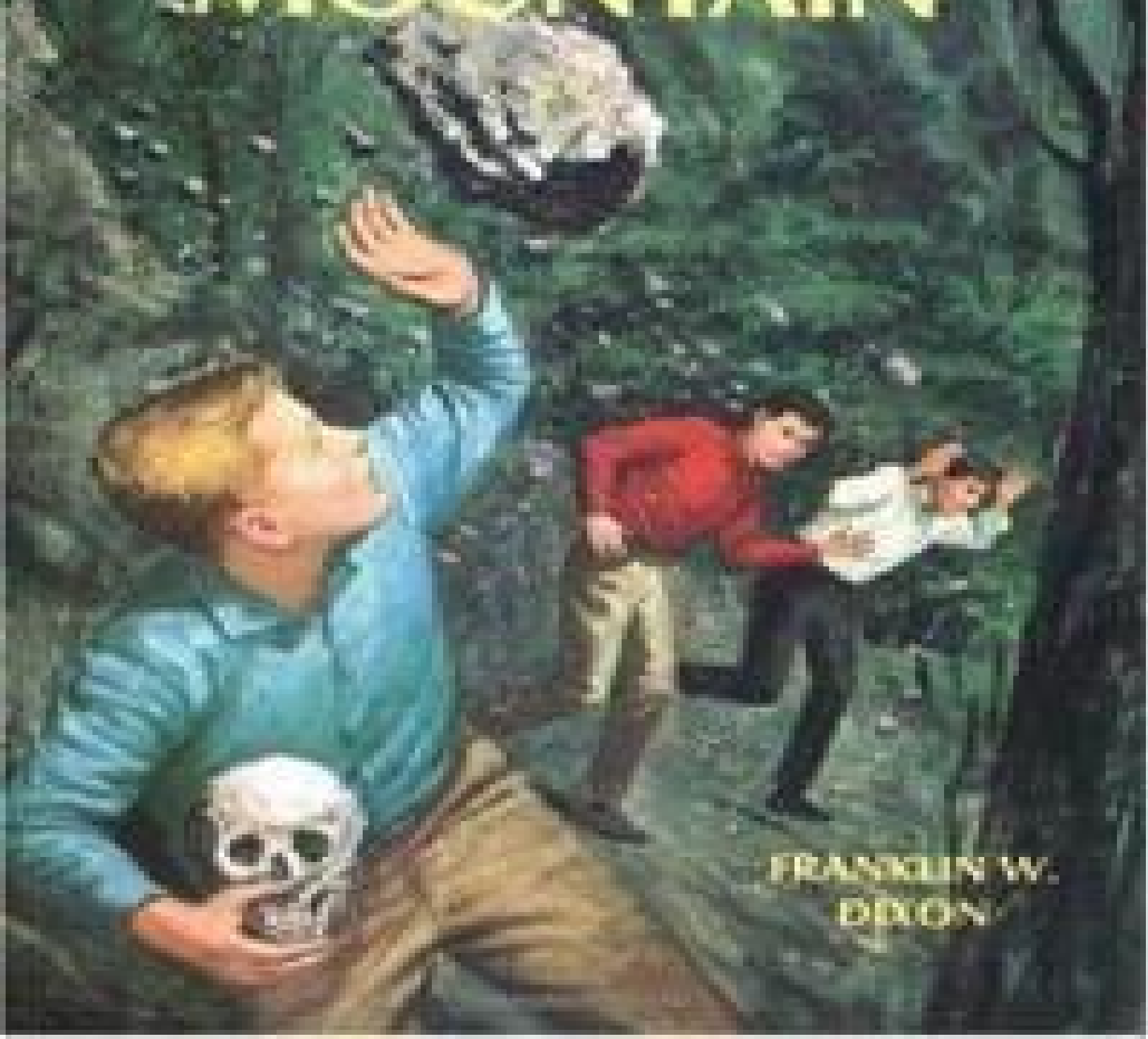


THE SECRET OF SKULL MOUNTAIN



FRANKLIN W.
DIXON

THE SECRET OF SKULL MOUNTAIN

By FRANKLIN W. DIXON

No. 27 in the Hardy Boys series.

This is the 1948 original text.

In the 1948 original, the Hardy Boys solve the mysterious disappearance of water from the Tarnack Reservoir. The 1966 revised text is altered.

The Hardy Boys series by Franklin W. Dixon, the first 58 titles.

The first year is the original year. The second is the year it was revised.

01 The Tower Treasure 1927, 1959

02 The House on the Cliff 1927, 1959

03 The Secret of the Old Mill 1927, 1962

04 The Missing Chums 1927, 1962

05 Hunting for Hidden Gold 1928, 1963

06 The Shore Road Mystery 1928, 1964.

07 The Secret of the Caves 1929, 1965

08 The Mystery of Cabin Island 1929, 1966

09 The Great Airport Mystery 1930, 1965

10 What Happened at Midnight 1931, 1967

- 11 While the Clock Ticked 1932, 1962
- 12 Footprints Under the Window 1933, 1962
- 13 The Mark on the Door 1934, 1967
- 14 The Hidden Harbor Mystery 1935, 1961
- 15 The Sinister Sign Post 1936, 1968
- 16 A Figure in Hiding 1937, 1965
- 17 The Secret Warning 1938, 1966
- 18 The Twisted Claw 1939, 1964
- 19 The Disappearing Floor 1940, 1964
- 20 The Mystery of the Flying Express 1941, 1968
- 21 The Clue of the Broken Blade 1942, 1969
- 22 The Flickering Torch Mystery 1943, 171
- 23 The Melted Coins 1944, 1970
- 24 The Short Wave Mystery 1945, 1966
- 25 The Secret Panel 1946, 1969
- 26 The Phantom Freighter 1947, 1970
- 27 The Secret of Skull Mountain 1948, 1966
- 28 The Sign of the Crooked Arrow 1949, 1970
- 29 The Secret of the Lost Tunnel 1950, 1968
- 30 The Wailing Siren Mystery 1951, 1968

- 31 The Secret of Wildcat Swamp 1952, 1969
- 32 The Crisscross Shadow 1953, 1969
- 33 The Yellow Feather Mystery 1954, 1971
- 34 The Hooded Hawk Mystery 1954, 1971
- 35 The Clue in the Embers 1955, 1972
- 36 The Secret of Pirates' Hill 1956, 1972
- 37 The Ghost of Skeleton Rock 1957, 1966
- 38 The Mystery at Devil's Paw 1959, 1973
- 39 The Mystery of the Chinese Junk 1960
- 40 The Mystery of the Desert Giant 1961
- 41 The Clue of the Screeching Owl 1962
- 42 The Viking Symbol Mystery 1963

- 43 The Mystery of the Aztec Warrior 1964
- 44 The Haunted Fort 1965
- 45 The Mystery of the Spiral Bridge 1966
- 46 The Secret Agent on Flight 101 1967
- 47 The Mystery of the Whale Tattoo 1968
- 48 The Arctic Patrol Mystery 1969
- 49 The Bombay Boomerang 1970

- 50 Danger on the Vampire Trail 1971
- 51 The Masked Monkey 1972
- 52 The Shattered Helmet 1973
- 53 The Clue of the Hissing Serpent 1974
- 54 The Mysterious Caravan 1975
- 55 The Witch-Master's Key 1976
- 56 The Jungle Pyramid 1977
- 57 Mystery of the Firebird Rocket 1978
- 58 Sting of the Scorpion 1979

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THE SECRET OF SKULL MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER 1

A Mysterious Skull

"Extra! Extra-a! 'Bayport Faces Water Shortage'! Read all-1 about-t it!"

Standing on a corner of Bayport's main street, the newsboy shouted the headline again.

Scarcely had he finished when a crowd began to surround him, and he was soon selling papers as rapidly as he could pocket the money.

Attracted by the newsboy's cries, Frank Hardy swung the roadster close to the curb and stopped it a few yards from the corner. His brother Joe jumped out of the car and wormed through the crowd, reappearing a moment later with a newspaper.

He slipped into the seat beside Frank, and the tall, dark-haired youth carefully nosed the roadster into the stream of traffic.

"What does the paper say?" Frank asked impatiently, as Joe sat silently reading.

2 The Secret of Skull Mountain Seconds passed without a reply. Frank turned his head for a quick look at his brother.

The blond-haired boy, one year younger than himself, was deeply absorbed in the news story, a worried frown on his face.

Frank nudged him. "Joe-snap out of it! It can's be *that* bad!"

The remark, penetrating Joe's concentration, made him look up. "It can't, huh?" he retorted. "Listen!"

He read aloud from the news story as Frank guided the roadster through the thinning traffic:

" 'City officials announced today that unless a way is found to fill Tarnack Reservoir, the people of Bayport may soon be completely without water.

" 'Last week,' " Joe continued to read, " 'work was completed on the dam to impound the water of the Tarnack River, and on the conduit which will carry the water to Bayport. But despite the efforts of the construction engineers, the reservoir will not fill with water-water which Bayport badly needs.' "

"Golly!" exclaimed Frank. "That *is* serious!"

Joe read on: " 'Robert Carpenter, a local engineer, has been employed by the builders of the dam to find out why the reservoir is not filling properly, but so far he has failed to provide a solution-' "

"Carpenter," Frank mused. "That name sounds familiar."

"Yes," Joe agreed. "I'm sure I've heard it before A Mysterious Skull 3

-wait! I've got it! Mr. Carpenter is the engineer Dick Ames works for!"

"Right, Joe. I bet Dick is working with him on the water project!"

The roadster was out of the heavy traffic now and Frank turned the car into the road which led toward the boys'

home. As he did so, Joe suddenly stiffened and his eyes grew wide with fear.

"Frank! Look out!"

Frank had not noticed the tall young man who, completely absorbed in the newspaper he was reading, had stepped from the curb into the road. Now he was walking directly into the path of the car.

Quickly, the Hardy boy twisted the wheel and jammed on the brakes. The roadster swerved precariously with a screech of tires. Frank caught a glimpse of a frightened face above the newspaper as the car bore down on the young man. For one sickening moment it seemed the roadster would run right over him, then the fender missed him by inches.

Joe leaped out as the car skidded to a stop, and ran back to where the young fellow

was standing. A moment later, Frank followed.

"Why, it's Dick!" he heard his brother exclaim. "Dick Ames!"

Frank also was surprised. He hadn't recognized the young engineer when he glimpsed his face above the newspaper.

4 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Dick," he asked anxiously. "Are you hurt?"

Dick grinned weakly and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"No," he replied. "Thanks to you!" He took a deep breath. "That was a pretty dumb thing for me to do-go jaywalking while reading a newspaper! But I became so interested in

the account of the water shortage, I forgot to watch where I was going!"

"Frank and I have just been reading that story," Joe told him. "Are you working with Mr.

Carpenter on the mystery, Dick?"

"Yes, I-" The tall engineer broke off and stared at the boys suspiciously. "Who told you it's a mystery?" he asked.

Frank grinned as Joe gave him a sly wink.

"It doesn't take a detective to figure out that when water won't fill a reservoir, and an engineer such as Mr. Carpenter can't seem to find the reason for it, there's something mysterious going on," Frank said.

The Hardy boys' interest in mysteries was well known in Bayport. The boys' father, Fenton Hardy, was one of the most brilliant private detectives in the United States, and Frank and Joe, although still in high school, had spent many vacations and afternoons after school helping him to solve baffling mysteries and bring criminals to justice. In solving their most recent case, the mystery of "The Phantom Freighter," the boys had proved even to their famous father that they had become expert amateur sleuths, A Mysterious Skull 5

and both Frank and Joe itched for another mystery to test their abilities.

They were eager to question Dick Ames about the mystery of Tarnack Dam, but the engineer suddenly turned pale and wavered unsteadily. Frank quickly thrust his hand under Dick's elbow while Joe took hold of his other arm.

"Dick, are you all right?" the younger Hardy boy asked anxiously.

Ames rubbed his eyes and looked at them somewhat dazedly.

"Guess I better sit down a minute," he said thinly.

"That's just what you're going to do," Frank told him. "Help me walk him to the car, Joe."

Dick protested, saying that if they would simply allow him to rest on the curb for a few minutes, he would soon be all right. But the Hardy boys refused to listen.

"You're coming home with us," Joe stated flatly, helping Dick to the car. "There you'll be able to lie down, if you feel like it. And if that doesn't cure you," he added, grinning, "Aunt Gertrude will stuff you to the ears with the best food you ever tasted!"

Dinner was on the table when Frank and Joe arrived home with Dick Ames. Both Mrs.

Hardy and Aunt Gertrude met them at the door, and Frank told them what had happened.

Mrs. Hardy, concerned about Dick, wanted him 6 The Secret of Skull Mountain to lie down at once, but Aunt Gertrude wouldn't hear of it.

"Fiddlesticks!" she scoffed. "The boy's just shaken up. There's nothing wrong with Dick that a plate of sausage and waffles won't fix!"

Dick surprised them by agreeing with the tall, solidly built spinster. The fresh air during the drive to the house had

greatly revived him, he told them-and the aroma of frying sausage was giving him a ravenous appetite!

Aunt Gertrude's smile was so triumphant that Frank and Joe couldn't help laughing.

Their aunt glared at them suspiciously.

"What are you two idiots chortling about?" she demanded. "Hurry up and make a place for Dick at the table!"

Aunt Gertrude spent most of her time at the home of her brother, Fenton Hardy. She

was very fond of Frank and Joe, and very proud of their success as amateur sleuths. But Aunt Gertrude never allowed her fondness for them to show in her manner, and was apt to be dictatorial toward the boys..

As the Hardy boys and Dick Ames sat down to large servings of sausage and waffles, they learned that Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude already knew about the threatened water shortage. A radio announcer had described the situation and urged listeners to limit their use of water to their barest needs.

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"Humph!" Aunt Gertrude sniffed. "What does he think we've been doing all these years?" She speared another sausage with her fork. "The authorities of this city should be ashamed of themselves. Pass the syrup, Frank. Why, even five years ago Bayport didn't have enough water. Joe, don't eat so fast. The whole city might burn down any time!"

"Don't say such things, Gertrude!" Mrs. Hardy objected, but the strong-willed spinster kept right on.

She reminded them of the increasing number of families moving into the Bayport area, described the lack of rooms in the schools for the extra children and the inadequate hospital facilities, and ended by predicting a shortage of gas and electricity!

"Wow!" Frank laughed. "That might mean no cooking!" He looked across the table at Dick, banteringly. "Dick, it looks like we've got to do something to make Bayport the good old town it used to be. Think Mr. Carpenter could use a couple of sleuths to help him find out why the reservoir won't fill?"

Joe looked at Dick, expecting a bantering reply, but the young engineer seemed to be seriously considering the question. Joe's eyes lit with hope. Maybe he and Frank would soon be involved in a mystery after all!

Dick was speaking. "He might, at that," he said 8 The Secret of Skull Mountain slowly. "Some pretty strange things have been happening lately on Skull Mountain.

Maybe you can find out what's behind them."

Frank and Joe exchanged a glance of elation-Skull Mountain, where the reservoir was located, was about twenty miles from Bayport. Neither of the boys knew a great deal about the mountain, but what they had heard made the rocky region seem darkly mysterious-a place where anything might happen.

"How soon can you come?" Dick asked.

"Right away!" Frank and Joe chorused.

"Swell!" Dick said. "I've got to get back to the camp this evening. We'll drive out there together."

"None of you are going anywhere until you've had your dessert," Aunt Gertrude put in firmly. "Apple cake."

"Why, Aunt Gertrude!" beamed Joe. "The biggest mystery in the world couldn't tear us away until we'd eaten your apple cake!"

An hour later, Frank was driving the roadster along the highway toward Skull Mountain.

Seated in the car with him were Joe and Dick Ames, and packed in the trunk and along the running board were folded pup tents and cots, hiking clothes and other camping equipment-not to mention a basket of sandwiches and cake Aunt Gertrude had prepared.

The two boys had promised to return home the A Mysterious Skull 9

next day, as Fenton Hardy was in another state working on a case and they did not like to leave their mother and aunt alone for too long a time.

A few miles farther, Frank turned the roadster off the highway onto a dirt road. Directly ahead loomed Skull Mountain. Most of the mountain was thickly covered with trees, but the slope facing the road was scarred by stretches of jagged rock and huge boulders. Scaling the mountain was hazardous, and few people in the area ever undertook the climb.

Now they were at the base of the mountain, and the narrow dirt road wound around the

foot of the rocky slope.

Suddenly Joe gripped Frank's arm.

"Frank! Look!" he cried. "There's a fire on Skull Mountain!"

Frank looked in the direction where his brother was pointing, and from his seat on the opposite side of the car Dick, too, craned his head to see.

A thin column of smoke rose from the trees which obscured the crest of the hill and drifted across the valley. As Frank brought the roadster to a halt, Joe quickly opened the dashboard compartment and whipped out a powerful pair of field glasses. The two boys and the engineer piled out of the convertible and Joe trained his glasses on the mountaintop.

"What do you make of it?" Frank asked.

10 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Do you suppose it's the start of a forest fire?" Dick said worriedly.

Joe did not answer at once. Then, as suddenly as it had risen, the smoke vanished.

There was no sign of flames.

"That's odd!" exclaimed Joe. "Now you see it, now you don't!"

"Let me have a look," Frank suggested.

He took the field glasses and focused them on the spot where they had seen the smoke. There was no sign of activity whatever. He turned slowly, bringing more of the mountain terrain into his field of vision. Before his eyes, half concealed by a huge boulder, appeared one of the strangest creatures he had ever seen—a gaunt-faced man with fierce eyes, long, shaggy hair that made him resemble a sheep dog, and a thick, unkempt beard.

His eyes seemed to burn down at the boy and his mouth hung open in a half-sly, half-foolish smile.

Frank uttered a low exclamation.

"What is it?" Joe demanded excitedly.

"A man," Frank told him, giving Joe the glasses. "At least, he looks more like a man than anything else!"

Joe trained the field glasses on the boulder Frank indicated, but he saw no sign of the mountain creature. Disappointed, he gave the glasses to Dick, but the young engineer could not detect him either.

A Mysterious Skull 1 f "What did he look like, Frank?" Dick asked, as they turned back toward the car.

Frank described the creature in detail, hoping Dick could identify him, but Dick shook his head. He had met some queer people while working on Skull Mountain, he said, but none of them matched Frank's description.

About to enter the car, they heard an ominous rumbling behind them. They turned swiftly, and Joe's jaw dropped.

"Look out!" he shouted.

Hurtling down the rocky slope with ever-increasing speed was a huge boulder-headed straight for the car! Faster and faster rolled the giant rock, crushing shrubs and shale in its path. And tumbling down the slope directly behind the boulder was a round, white object.

"Duck!" yelled Frank.

The two boys and their friend scrambled to safety behind a near-by tree. They saw the boulder strike a huge tree stump and teeter precariously. The small white object kept right on rolling.

"It's a skull!" cried Joe.

The words were barely out of his mouth when the boulder rolled off the tree stump and again rumbled down the slope toward the car.

The Hardys and their friend stood transfixed,, waiting for the crash!

CHAPTER II

Strange Laughter

the boys and young Ames could hardly believe it. One moment, it seemed inevitable that the boulder would crash into the car. The next instant, they *saw it collide with a jutting*

rock, change its course and miss the roadster by a dozen feet!

"Whew!" Joe cried. "That was close!"

Dick nodded. "That's the second time today my Jife's been threatened!" he said, grinning. "Must be die season for accidents!"

Frank shook his head grimly. "That was no accident, Dick. That was our man of the mountain!"

Frank focused the field glasses on the spot where lie had seen the creature hiding behind the boulder. As he suspected, the boulder was no longer there •-and neither was the mountain man.

Joe's lips tightened and he walked toward the slope. "I'm going up after that guy!"

"Joe, wait!" Frank called. "There'll be plenty of 12

Strange Laughter 13

time later to hunt for him. Right now we've got to go on to the camp."

Joe returned reluctantly, and they all walked back to the car.

Suddenly Frank broke into laughter. Sitting on the driver's seat, facing the wheel, was the human skull they had seen tumbling down the mountain. It apparently had bounced into the car after hitting the road.

"Hi, stranger!" Frank said. "What's your name?"

He picked up the skull and looked at it carefully. In the rough descent down the rocky slope, it had become badly battered.

"You're a little tough to recognize, mister," Joe added with a grin, "but you sure brought us luck! We'll appoint you mascot for our new mystery!"

They propped the skull on the ledge behind the seat of the roadster and set out for the camp. After they had traveled a few miles more, Dick showed Frank where to park the car.

Shouldering their camping equipment, the two boys and the engineer started up a narrow, winding trail toward the top of the mountain.

Single file, they climbed steadily, brushing aside brambles and placing their feet carefully to avoid stepping on loose stones and turning their ankles. Once Frank was certain they would have to unload a few pieces of their camping equipment in order to ascend a particularly steep and treacherous section 14 The Secret of Skull Mountain of the trail. But they made it-and found themselves standing on the crest of the mountain, looking down on Tarnack Valley.

This was the valley engineers had converted into a reservoir. Far below them, despite the gathering dusk, Frank and Joe

could see a thin sheet of water behind a towering white concrete dam.

As they started down toward the dam, Dick explained that the Tarnack River had flowed over the valley bottom, but its course had been diverted to allow the engineers to construct the reservoir. Then, with the dam completed, the river had been rediverted to its old bed, in order that it could fill the reservoir.

"Everything's set for the water to flow into Bayport," Dick went on, "except for one thing-the water won't rise in the reservoir."

The section of the slope on which the Hardy boys found themselves was covered with trees, rocks and creeping vines which constantly threatened to trip them and plunge them down the steep mountainside. But as they came to a place level with the top of the dam, they saw that the remainder of the slope, clear down to the water, was without a single tree.

Frank and Joe circled the valley with their eyes. There was a clear line extending completely around the sides of the valley-exactly level with the top of the dam. The slopes above the line were thick with trees, rocks and foliage. Below the line, the trees

Strange Laughter 15

had been cut down-though in one area a great many shrubs and thickly matted brambles had been allowed to remain.

Frank knitted his brows. "That's queer!" he exclaimed.

"What?" Dick inquired, looking around at him.

"All those bushes and brambles," Frank said, pointing to the slope below them. "When the construction men cut down the trees for the reservoir, why didn't they clear out the underbrush too?"

"They did clear out most of it," Dick replied. "But a few days before the men were finished, a landslide at the top of the mountain tumbled down more rocks and gravel and bushes."

"Wow!" Joe ejaculated. "Anyone hurt?"

"Yes. Three of the men were seriously injured. Then the rest of the construction crew decided it was too risky to clear away the brush at that time, and laid down their tools. Of course, the men are coming back to complete the job," Dick added. "But first, Bob Carpenter and I must find out why the water in the reservoir won't rise."

They continued on down the slope. The way was much easier now, and they made rapid progress. Soon they could make out a small construction shack at the foot of the hill.

Dick cupped his hands to his mouth and called, and Bob Carpenter came out of the shack and stood waiting for them.

16 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Hi!" he greeted them as they arrived at the camp.

Bob Carpenter was a tall, sun-tanned engineer with an intelligent face and a friendly manner. He studied Frank and Joe with keen interest as Dick introduced them.

"Hardy, eh? You must be Fenton Hardy's sons."

"We are," said Frank.

"In that case, I'm twice as glad to see you," the young engineer said, smiling. He shook their hands firmly and waved toward the shack. "Welcome to Carpenter's Cottage!"

He strode toward the shack, a well-built man wearing a windbreaker, khaki breeches, and leather boots laced to his knees. Frank, Joe and Dick followed him into the shack and Dick gave him a copy of the evening newspaper.

Bob Carpenter's face grew grim as he read the story on the water shortage, and the muscles of his jaw tightened with anger as he came to the account of his failure to find what was wrong with the reservoir.

Frank leaned forward across the table at which they were sitting. "Mr. Carpenter," he said earnestly, "we'd like to help you-Joe and I. Will you let us?"

Bob Carpenter studied both the boys. "Of course," he said. "I know your reputation as amateur detectives. I'll appreciate any assistance you can give me."

Strange Laughter 17

Joe grinned happily. "Dick said some pretty strange things have been happening up here," he said.

"Yes." Bob Carpenter frowned. "Smoke, for one thing. A thin column of smoke rises from the top of the mountain every so often. I've tried to track it down, but so far I haven't been able to find where it comes from."

"That must be the same smoke we saw!" Frank put in excitedly.

The youth explained what had happened while he, Joe and Dick were motoring along the road at the foot of the

mountain. Bob observed that the smoke they had seen probably was coming from the same spot as the column of smoke he had been seeing. Frank had hoped that the engineer could also identify the strange man of the mountain, but Bob Carpenter was as perplexed as the boys themselves.

"He may be a squatter," he declared, "but I never came across one who matches your description."

"Squatter?" Joe asked, puzzled.

"Yes," Dick said. "There were several squatters living in the valley when the contractors moved in to build the reservoir. Most of them gave up their homes and moved back over the ridge to the other side of the mountain. But a few-like Sailor Hawkins and Potato

Annie-refused to leave and are still hanging onto their shacks in the valley."

"Would Sailor Hawkins or Potato Annie be likely 18 The Secret of Skull Mountain to roll a boulder or toss a skull at us?" queried Frank.

Bob laughed. "Possibly. But I doubt it. They're troublesome, but I've no proof that *they've tried to scare me away from here.*"

Joe's interest quickened. "You mean, someone's been tossing skulls at *you?*"

Bob laughed again. "Not exactly. But I found a skull planted in my knapsack-and another on my worktable."

"Golly!" said Joe. "Where do they all come from?"

"There's an Indian burial ground on the other side of the mountain," Bob told him.

"Doubtless, the skulls come from there."

Surveying equipment and tools had been stolen from the camp also, the boys learned.

And mysterious explosions had been set off close by. It seemed clear that a determined effort was being made to frighten the engineers away from the vicinity. But who was behind it? Why?

"One thing is certain," Bob Carpenter declared, his jaw set. "I'm not leaving here until I've found what's wrong with the reservoir."

He looked at Frank, then Joe, and then Dick. "I've a hunch that working together, we can lick this thing," he told them.

"You can count on us, Mr. Carpenter," said Frank, and Joe nodded his agreement.

Bob Carpenter smiled. "Call me Bob," he told Strange
Laughter 19

them. He glanced at his watch. "Now, let's hit the sack. We have plenty to do tomorrow!"

It was but a half hour's work for the boys to set up their pup tents close by "Carpenter's Cottage," and soon they were asleep in their cots. But it wasn't long before their sleep was rudely shattered.

An explosion rocked the earth a few hundred feet from their tents, and bits of earth, stones and twigs rained all around

them. Then from some distance away, came a shrill, cackling laugh!

CHAPTER III

Potato Annie

"FRANK! Help!"

It was Joe calling. Frank felt a sudden fear. Had his brother been injured by a falling rock?

"I'm coming, Joe!"

He crawled hurriedly out of his tent, then stopped short and began to laugh. Some of the debris had fallen on Joe's tent and knocked it down. Joe was floundering under the canvas like an angry sea lion! Frank shook off a few of the pebbles and twigs, then lifted a corner of the canvas. Joe crawled out from under it.

He took a deep breath. "Whew!" he said. "The darn thing nearly smothered me!"

The boys heard voices in the shack and through a window saw Bob light a lantern.

"What happened?" asked Joe. "One minute I was dreaming about one of Aunt Gertrude's pies-and the next, I thought the sky was falling on me!"

20

Potato Annie 21

• 'You know as much as I do, Joe," Frank told him. "Put some clothes on. We'll have a look."

The boys dressed quickly, picked up their flashlights and met Bob and Dick, who came out with a lantern.

It did not take them long to find the spot where the explosion had occurred. A huge, jagged hole had been torn in the ground.

Bob examined it briefly. "Dynamite," he reported. "Just like the other explosions."

Frank and Joe trained their flashlights on the hole.

"What's the purpose of the explosions, Bob?" asked Frank.

"So far, they seem to be part of a sort of 'war of nerves,' " Bob replied. "Whoever sets them off probably hopes we'll crack under the strain and go away."

"Let's hope the explosives are never used for anything more serious than that," Dick added.

The boys agreed soberly. The next charge of dynamite set off might be an attack on the dam-or on their lives!

"I wish I could lay my hands on that guy," Joe said as they started back. "That cackle of his gives me the creeps."

Suddenly Frank stopped. His flashlight, beamed on the ground to his left, had spotted a half-eaten turnip. He ran to it, the others close behind him.

22 The Secret of Skull Mountain
Beside the turnip were the prints of naked human feet. And the print of the right foot showed the small toe to be missing!

"These look as though they might be the tracks of the man of the mountain," Frank said.

Joe nodded in agreement, and the boys decided to follow the footprints the first thing in the morning.

The rest of the night was uneventful. The sun was well up when the boys awoke in the morning with the aroma of frying bacon tickling their nostrils. Breakfast over, they returned to the spot where they had seen the prints and set out to follow them.

In some places on the hillside the prints were barely distinguishable, in others they were strikingly clear. Almost without knowing it, so intently did their eyes search the ground for the mysterious tracks, Frank and Joe found themselves a stone's throw from a stretch of cleared land where row upon row of potato plants and other garden vegetables were growing.

Behind the garden patch was a small shanty.

"That must be Potato Annie's place," Frank said.

"Yes," agreed Joe. "And the footprints are heading straight for it!"

As they approached the tidy garden, the boys saw a woman working in it. She wore a sunbonnet with an enormous peak that completely shaded her face, a faded cotton dress and a huge checkered apron Potato Annie 23

that hung below her knees. Both Frank and Joe noticed that although she was barelegged, Potato Annie was wearing shoes.

Annie straightened up at their approach and stared at the boys.

"Who be you?" she cried.

"We're from Mr. Carpenter's camp," Frank began. "We-"

"Oh, you be, be you!" Annie cut him short. "Then you git on back there, if you know whut's good fer you! Ain't no engineers goin' to traipse on my land!"

"We're not engineers," Joe tried to explain. "-We're-"

But Potato Annie was deaf to any voice but her own. "You hear me! Git!

Good-fer-nothin' loafers-drivin self-respectin' people off their proppity!"

Annie bent double and rocked with sudden pain. She looked up at the boys, her eyes reflecting her misery, and whispered, "If I didn't have the rheu-matiz, I'd run you off myself!"

Frank went to her quickly and held her arm. "Let me help you," he begged.

Annie peered at him suspiciously. Then she said grudgingly, "They's some pills in the house-on the table. If I could have one o' them, it would relieve me some."

"I'll get the pills!" Joe told her.

24 The Secret of Skull Mountain He ran into the house and returned a moment later with a small green bottle. Potato Annie unscrewed the lid, swallowed a pill with a grimace,

screwed the lid on again and put the bottle in the pocket of her apron.

She studied the boys carefully. "Whut you want?" she said at last.

"We came for some information," Frank told her.

He described the column of smoke he had seen, and the explosion, but although Annie admitted having seen the smoke and having heard the explo* eions, she claimed she knew nothing about them.

"Have you ever come across any skulls around here?" Joe put in.

"Skulls?" scoffed the old woman. "Why, they's a million of 'em buried on the other side o'

this mountain! And they's plenty o' skulls scattered on this side, too! My grandpaw told me the whole Injun tribe died o' cholery. No water from this mountain'll ever be fit to drink!" She cackled with sudden mirth. "Tell *that* to your engineer friends!"

Frank tried another tack. "Do you know an old man who lives on the mountain?" he asked. "A gaunt-faced man, with long, shaggy hair-?"

Annie's head jerked up suddenly, and into her eyes crept an undeniable look of fright!

CHAPTER IV

Chet Joins Up

in the next instant the old woman's eyes went blank, and she declared flatly that she had never seen nor heard of such a creature.

Frank thanked Annie for her information, and the old woman sniffed.

"Ain't told you nuthin', fur as I know." She watched the boys start down the slope in the direction from which they had come. "Tell them engineers this valley ain't never goin' to be covered with water!" she yelled after them. "Tell 'em Annie said so!"

The boys grinned at one another and looked back. Annie was bending over her potato plants again.

When they reached the camp, they saw Bob and Dick slowly circling the partly filled reservoir in a rowboat. Dick swung the oars, while at regular intervals Bob dropped white-painted shingles into the water.

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2,6 The Secret of Skull Mountain Frank waved, and Dick pulled the boat toward them. He rested his oars a few yards from the shore, and the boat swung easily alongside the boys.

"What are you doing?" Joe asked.

"Trying to find out where the water is escaping," Bob explained. "The river is feeding the reservoir okay, but the water won't rise over twenty feet. Somewhere, somehow-it's draining out."

"The shingles will help us to detect currents where the water may be escaping," Dick added,, "What have you two been up to?"

Frank described how the trail of the footprints had led them to Potato Annie. "I guess we didn't accomplish much," he said dispiritedly.

"Buck up!" Bob said reassuringly. "You fellows can't expect to solve this thing the first day."

Frank smiled and reminded Joe that they had promised their mother to return home that day.

"We'll be back before nightfall," he told the two engineers.

"You bet," Joe put in. "Wild horses couldn't keep us away from this mountain after what's happened!"

Bob waved, and Dick swung the boat away from the shore. Some time later, as the boys stood on the ridge before descending the trail to their car, they saw the boat still circling the reservoir-looking, from where they were, like a tiny chip of wood.

An hour later when the Hardy boys drove up to Chet Joins Up
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their home, Aunt Gertrude was on the lawn, digging out dandelions. Joe, his eyes twinkling, picked up the skull from the seat beside him and held it in front of him as he got out of the car.

"Hi, Aunt Gertrude," he greeted. "We'd like to have you meet a friend of ours!"

The tall, graying woman gave a shriek and almost lost her balance trying to get away from her nephew. Joe slowly but relentlessly pursued her.

"Get away from me, Joe Hardy!" Aunt Gertrude cried. "Get away, I say!"

Joe laughed. "Okay, Auntie," he said impishly. "But that's no way to win friends!"

He started up the path toward the door, and Frank joined him.

"Don't you dare take that horrible thing into the house!" Aunt Gertrude cried after them.

"If you must keep it, put it in your workshop where decent people won't have to look at it!"

The boys grinned and went to the room over the garage which they used as a combination workshop and clubhouse for their friends.

A few years before, the third floor of the Hardy house had been theirs to do with as they pleased. But as their sleuthing interests widened to include fingerprinting and chemical analysis, Aunt Gertrude had declared they might blow up the house, and had insisted that her nephews transfer their activities to the room over the garage.

28 The Secret of Skull Mountain From the time Frank and Joe had solved their first mystery, that of the "Tower Treasure,"

down to their most recent case, they had always found Aunt Gertrude a little hard to cope with.

Their friend, Chet Morton, had also had some lively encounters with Aunt Gertrude. Chet had played an amusing role in the mystery of "The Phantom Freighter," when he took a course in fly-tying and became involved with the Hardy boys in the capture of an elusive band of criminals.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, the boys went to greet their mother. Mrs.

Hardy made no attempt to conceal her relief at their safe return, but she accepted calmly their announcement that they planned to go back to Skull Mountain that evening.

"I'll prepare an early dinner," she promised them, "so you won't run the risk of traveling over that mountain trail in the dark. It sounds dangerous."

"And I'll bake a cake," Aunt Gertrude told them. "You can take it with you when you go."

Mr. Carpenter must be starved for some decent food. I imagine the poor lamb has been living on herbs and roots and-and nuts all this time."

Joe grinned as his aunt went toward the kitchen. "Put some icing on it, Auntie," he called after her. "A skull and crossbones would be just the thing!"

His aunt glared at him, then disappeared with a swish of her skirt.

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Late that afternoon, the boys, their mother and aunt sat down to an appetizing dinner of roast beef and vegetables. The talk soon turned to Fenton Hardy, who had been away from home for the past two weeks.

"What kind of case is he working on?" Frank asked.

"I don't know," Mrs. Hardy confessed. "You know your father. He likes to keep the details of his work to himself." She smiled at the boys. "I suppose he feels I'll have less to worry about that way."

"Fenton's right," Aunt Gertrude said flatly. "Besides, a private detective's business should be private -just like a doctor's, or a lawyer's. That's why he's called a 'private eye'!"

she finished complacently.

"Why, Aunt Gertrude," Frank said with mock astonishment, "you've been reading detective stories!"

The elderly woman fixed him with a sharp stare. "And why not?" she demanded.

The boys laughed and went on eating. But both could not help wondering what sort of mystery was keeping their father away for so long.

The boys had just downed a double portion of meat and vegetables when they heard a rattletrap car chug into the driveway. A moment later, Chet Morton came into the dining room, greeted the Hardys cordially and drew a chair up to the table 30 The Secret of Skull Mountain

without further ceremony. He spread a napkin carefully in his lap, took an extra plate, picked up knife and fork and

beamed at them.

The Hardys were accustomed to Chet's behavior. It was a well-established fact that Chet's visits usually coincided with the Hardy family's meal hours. The Mortons lived on a farm and ate all their meals at least an hour earlier than the Hardys. Chet's capacity for good food seemed unlimited.

Chet was always welcome to eat whatever the Hardys had. But now, because dinner had been started earlier and their mountain experiences had made Frank and Joe unusually hungry, there wasn't a scrap of food left.

"You're too late, Chet," Frank told him. "We've just finished dinner."

Chet groaned. He looked at his watch. "Gosh," he said plaintively, "I came as quick as I could!"

Joe could not help laughing at the woebegone expression on Chet's face. Next time, he promised, as Aunt Gertrude went into the kitchen, the Hardys would reserve a special plate for Chet.

Aunt Gertrude returned bearing a seven-layer chocolate nut cake. Chet's face lit up as he saw it-but his happiness was shortlived.

"Here's the cake for the camp," Aunt Gertrude told her nephews.

Chet's face quivered slightly as he watched her pack the cake neatly in a box.

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"Camp? What camp?" he quavered.

Joe winked at Frank. Chet's eyes were fixed hungrily on the cake, and from time to time he wet his lips.

"Bob Carpenter's camp on Skull Mountain," Joe informed young Morton. "Frank and I are working with Bob on the water-shortage mystery."

Chet's interest quickened, but he could not take his eyes from the cake.

"I read about the water shortage," he said. "But what are you fellows doing up there?"

Frank told him of their experiences but carefully omitted any reference to the skull, and his eyes pleaded with Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude not to give away the adventure.

Joe, sensing Frank's plan, concealed a smile.

"Why don't you come with us to the camp, Chet?" he said casually. "You can help us eat the cake."

Chet beamed at the suggestion, then he eyed Frank and Joe suspiciously.

"I don't know," he said dubiously. "Every time I get mixed up with you two, something happens to make me regret it."

"Nonsense, Chet," Frank said. "What can happen to you on a camping trip?"

"Plenty of things-with you two around," Chet retorted.

He described darkly the dangers of snakes, insects, forest fires, floods, landslides and wild animals.

32 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Well, if you don't want to go-" Frank said finally. He looked at his brother. "Guess we'd

better get started, Joe."

Joe nodded and picked up the cake box. He pried the lid slightly open for another look and smacked his lips appreciatively.

This was more than Chet could bear.

"Wait, fellows!" he begged. "I'll go with you!"

Chet accompanied the boys to their workshop to help them carry some camping equipment to the car. When they reached the door, Frank went ahead and pretended to fumble with the light switch.

"Guess the bulb's burned out," he said, as the room remained in darkness.

Joe, who was behind Chet, took a flashlight from his pocket and thrust it into Chet's hand.

"Here, Chet, use this."

Chet beamed the flash into the room-then gave a gasp. The flashlight clattered on the floor.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked.

"Th-there's a skull in there!" Chet cried. "It looked right at me!" He struggled to pass Joe. "Let me out of here!"

"You must be seeing things!" Frank laughed. "I'll show you."

He trained the flashlight on the skull.

"There it is again!" Chet yelled.

Joe peered past him. "Oh, that," he said airily. "That's an old friend of ours!"

Chet Joins Up 33

"Sure," supported Frank. "In fact, that's our great ancestor, Chief Washeewapl."

"W-what?" Chet quavered.

Frank snapped on the ceiling light and Chet's lips tightened with disgust.

"You guys make me sick," he announced.

But it wasn't long before he regained his good humor, and together the three boys drove in the roadster to the Morton farm. Chet ran into the house to pack some clothes, but when he returned the Hardy boys saw that he carried far more food than camping duds.

"No telling how long we'll have to stay in camp," Chet explained.

Frank and Joe grinned but said nothing. Both knew Chet would regret his choice when he had to carry the heavy food packages up the steep mountain trail which led to the camp.

And the Hardy boys, with extra equipment to carry, could not help him.

Some time later they arrived on the mountaintop, Chet puffing and perspiring all the way, then made the comparatively easy descent down the slope to the camp.

Bob and Dick welcomed the boys warmly, and soon they all sat down in "Carpenter's Cottage" to a snack of milk and

sandwiches.

In a corner of the shack, Frank saw a stack of white-painted shingles.

34 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Did you discover where the water is escaping from the reservoir?" he asked Bob eagerly.

The engineer's face clouded. "No," he said. "Dick and I rowed completely around the valley, dropping shingles in the water of the reservoir. Then we watched to see if any of the shingles floated in any particular direction-revealing a current which would show us where water was escaping. We didn't find a thing. Finally, we gave up and brought the shingles back here."

"It beats me," Dick said. "All we know so far is that the water rises during the day and sinks at night. The depth is never more than twenty feet."

"Couldn't be a leak in the dam, could there?" suggested Joe.

Bob shook his head. "We've been over every inch of it," he declared. The tall young engineer was silent for a moment. "There's only one possibility," he said slowly.

The Hardy boys, Chet and Dick looked at Bob with ill-concealed impatience. What other possibility could there be?

Bob gave a self-conscious laugh. "You may think I'm crazy for putting so much faith in this idea-but it's the only explanation left."

Bob thought for a minute. Then, as the others leaned forward with anticipation, he described what was in his mind.

While an engineering student in college, Bob Chet Joins Up
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said, he had made a careful study of the geology of the country around Bayport. In his reading, he had come across a geologist's speculation that during a glacial epoch the Tarnack River had been blocked by a moraine-a gigantic mass of sand, rock and other debris deposited by the glacier that once had covered that entire region.

According to the geologist's belief, the river had worn an outlet underground to the Atlantic Ocean. Then, later, the river had eaten a path through the moraine and had taken its

present course.

"If the geologist's theory is true," Bob finished, "somewhere under Skull Mountain is a subterranean passage to the sea!"

The boys stared at him, openmouthed.

"And you believe the water from the reservoir is escaping through the ancient outlet?"

Frank asked at last.

"Exactly," Bob nodded.

"Wow!" exclaimed Joe. "What a story!"

"But wouldn't the men who built the dam have discovered the tunnel when they diverted the river from the valley?"
Frank persisted.

"If the tunnel started from the river bottom, yes," Bob admitted. "But if there *is* such an outlet, it must start higher

up-on one of the slopes."

"If we could only find it," Dick said, "our troubles would be over."

"//." Bob laughed. "That's the trouble with 36 The Secret of Skull Mountain theories! They're full of *ifs*!" He yawned. "I don't know about you fellows-but I'm going to get some shut-eye!"

The boys agreed that it was time to turn in, and Frank and Joe went to help Chet pitch a pup tent next to theirs. Soon the boys were asleep. But once again their sleep was rudely interrupted.

This time, Chet's piercing shriek shattered the night!

CHAPTER V

Sailor Hawkins

As Frank, and Joe ducked out of their tents and hurried toward Chet, they saw Bob and Dick running to join them.

Chet was kneeling at the opening to his tent, staring at something inside. He held a flashlight, but his hand shook so violently that Frank took the torch from him.

"Chet, what is it?" he asked anxiously.

Chet did not look at him. He lifted his arm slowly and pointed. "There-on my pillow!" he whispered.

The boys' eyes followed Chet's outstretched arm. Staring at them from Chet's cot was a human skull!

"The man of the mountain!" Joe breathed.

Frank nodded soberly. There didn't seem to be much doubt but that the mysterious creature who had rolled a skull down the mountain at them the 37

38 The Secret of Skull Mountain evening before also had paid a visit to Chet in the past few hours!

Frank told Bob and Dick of his suspicion, and the engineers agreed.

"I woke up when I felt something cold against my cheek," Chet blubbered, "and there it was-resting right against my face!" He shivered. "Ugh!"

Joe, shining his flashlight about the interior of the small tent, suddenly asked, "Chet, what did you do with your clothes?"

"Clothes? Why, I put them right there-" Chet's jaw dropped as he looked at the canvas sack which had held his camping duds. "Holy smoke I" he yelped. "They're gone!"

He grabbed the sack and examined it carefully, but there wasn't an article of clothing left. Suddenly he stared at the soft earth beside the sack, and bent down for a closer look.

"Hey!" he cried. "Bring the light closer-quick!"

Frank flashed the torch on the spot at which Chet was staring fixedly.

Clearly visible on the ground was the print of a naked foot-with a missing toe!

"Joe, look!" Frank pointed excitedly. "The footprints we followed must have been made by the man we saw on the mountain!"

"Yes," Joe agreed grimly. "We've sure got a lot to settle with that guy! First, the boulder

and the

Sailor Hawkins 39

skulls, then the explosion-and now, Chet's clothes!"

"Do you think he could be responsible for the smoke, too?" Dick asked.

"Could be," Frank assented. He looked out of the tent toward the shadowy mountain peak. "I'd give up a month of my vacation to know where he is right now!"

"Never mind, Frank," Joe assured him. "We'll take another crack at those footprints in the morning!"

Early the next day, the boys again set out to trail the mysterious prints. Joe had supplied the unhappy Chet with shirt and pants which fit him like a sausage skin, and Frank had contributed socks and a pair of boots. Chet could get his feet into the boots, but they were too tight for walking, so he had remained at the camp.

Far below them, as they made their way along the mountain slope, the Hardy boys could see Bob and Dick. The two engineers were again circling the reservoir in their rowboat. But what they were doing the boys could not determine.

It was more difficult to follow the footprints now than it had been the previous day. The trail led in another direction, through stretches of mountain scrub and rocky shale, so that several times the boys almost lost the prints completely.

After a long, hot scramble they saw a cabin ahead -situated just below what one day would be the 40 The Secret of Skull Mountain water level of the reservoir. It looked very bare and small against the deforested hillside.

Smoke drifted lazily from an iron stack, but there were no other signs of life.

As they approached the cabin, Joe plucked at Frank's sleeve and pointed off to the left.

"Look!" he whispered.

Frank glanced in the direction Joe was pointing. The footprints led unmistakably to the edge of the forest, a few hundred feet beyond and above the cabin. But what aroused the boys' interest were several fresh-cut tree stumps.

Someone had cut down quite a number of trees there recently.

For what, the boys wondered. Certainly not for the cabin's fireplace or stove. More green wood had been cut than would go up in smoke in a squatter's stove. Go up in smoke?

Both boys turned to look at the same moment toward the top of Skull Mountain. A thin column of gray smoke was curling up in the clear air!

"I think we'll have a talk with the owner of this cabin," Frank decided, pressing his lips together.

They walked quietly along the hillside to the cabin, then stopped short. From inside the dilapidated house they could hear a hoarse voice singing the words to a rollicking sea chantey!

"Sailor Hawkins!" Joe said, grinning.

The boys winced as the voice went sour on a high note, then stepped onto the porch.

Immediately, a Sailor Hawkins 41

parrot chained to a wooden stand screamed at them.

"Avast, ye lubbers!" The brightly plumed bird craned his neck at them curiously, then set up a furious squawking. "Man the topsail, me hearties! Lend a hand there-or I'll keelhaul ye!"

Frank and Joe laughed loudly.

The parrot flapped his wings noisily. "Keelhaul ye! Keelhaul ye! Keelhaul ye!" he screamed.

A short, squat man with a rolling gait ran out on the porch and lifted his hand threateningly to the parrot. "Pipe down, ye blighter. Or I'll give ye the back o' me hand!"

The bird subsided with several protesting squawks and the man turned to Frank and Joe.

"Now then, mateys," he said, hitching his trousers with a nautical gesture, "who are you?"

Remembering how Potato Annie had received the information that the boys had come from the engineers' camp, Frank decided not to mention the fact until he had to.

"I'm Frank Hardy," he told the man. "This is my brother, Joe. You're Sailor Hawkins, aren't you?"

"Captain Hawkins," the man corrected him with sudden dignity. "Least, I used to be-when I had me own square-rigger."

"Isn't this an odd place for a sailor to be?" Joe inquired.

"Aye, mate, it is that," Hawkins assured him. He 42 The Secret of Skull Mountain looked around and shook his head gloomily. "I never would've come here if me ship hadn't cracked up on a reef." He sighed heavily. "Split every timber of her!"

"Can't you go back to sea?" Frank asked.

Sailor Hawkins sighed again. "Ah, laddie, I wish I could! It'd be heaven to find a deck under me feet again! But I'm too old for them newfangled vessels!" He glared at them suddenly. "But I ain't too old to fight for me rights!"

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

Hawkins jerked his thumb. "This cabin-that's what I mean!" he shouted. "I built her meself! Put every board an' nail in her!" He stepped off the porch and scooped up a handful of dirt. "An' the land's mine, too! I been here seven years, an' when ye been squattin' seven years-the land is your'n!"

He returned to the porch and stared at the boys suspiciously.

"Mark me, mateys," he said, stubbing a blunt forefinger against Frank's chest for emphasis, "if any o' them smart-alecky engineers try to run water over me property, I'll blow 'em higher than a mainmast!"

He grabbed up a rifle from the porch to show that he meant what he said.

The Hardy boys hastily assured Sailor Hawkins that they personally had no intention of destroying his property, and he appeared somewhat mollified.

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However, he couldn't-or wouldn't-throw any more light on the mystifying events than had Potato Annie.

Like Annie, Hawkins had seen the smoke and heard the explosions, but he had no idea what they meant. Nor had he ever seen the shaggy-haired man of the mountain.

"We noticed someone has cut down a great deal of timber above you there in the forest," Frank said pointedly.

Hawkins glared at him. "Aye," he said. "I cut it. A man can cut wood on his own property, can't he?"

"It's an awful lot of wood," Joe put in.

"Yes," Frank added. "And it could make a lot of smoke."

The short, squat man brought up his rifle and leveled it at them.

"Sink me if I don't think you're working with them engineers!" he said.

The boys admitted the truth of his statement.

Hawkins' face flushed an angry red and his finger twitched on the rifle's trigger.

"Get off me land 'fore I blast ye off!" he roared.

The boys stepped off the porch and the voice of the parrot screamed after them.

"I'll keelhaul ye! Keelhaul ye! Keelhaul ye!"

Joe looked back and laughed. "Pleasant custom* ers!" he said.

44 The Secret of Skull Mountain They retraced their steps until they were sure Sailor Hawkins could no longer see them, then they headed for the stretch of forest where they had last seen the footprints.

Frank and Joe stopped beside a freshly cut tree stump. In the soft, damp earth around the stump were several footprints which matched the ones they had been following.

"Come on," said Frank. "We'll trail these prints until we find who's at the end of them!"

But the trail ended a few hundred feet deeper in the forest. Whoever had left the footprints had vanished over a stretch of sheer rock-and the prints had vanished with him.

Disappointed, the boys turned back. They had reached the edge of the forest directly above Hawkins' cabin, when Joe whispered a warning.

Hawkins was sitting on the porch. And sitting with him-talking in urgent tones-was a tall, thin stranger!

CHAPTER VI

The Missing Scientist

"wonder who he is?" queried Joe, as he crouched with his brother behind some shrubs at the edge of the woods.

Frank shook his head. "Can you hear what they're saying?" he asked.

Both boys listened intently, but the voices were too far away for them to distinguish the words.

"Maybe we could get closer and hide behind the cabin," Joe suggested.

Frank vetoed the idea. "We couldn't reach the cabin without being seen," he pointed out. "The ground is clear all the way from here to the house."

They strained their ears to catch a few words of the conversation, but to no avail. Finally, the stranger departed.

Frank and Joe watched him go down the slope.

"I sure wish we could follow him," said Joe, as the man's figure grew smaller and smaller.

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46 The Secret of Skull Mountain "So do I," Frank agreed. "But on the bare hillside he'd be sure to spot us. Come on.

Let's get back to the camp."

It was noon when the boys arrived at Carpenter's camp. From there they could see that Chet had joined Bob and Dick in the boat. The youth was standing precariously on one of the seats, probing with a long pole at a patch of brambles which clung to the slope a few feet under water.

"Any luck?" Frank called.

"Not yet!" Bob yelled back. "If there's an underground outlet in this valley, we haven't found it!"

"Take it easy, Chet!" Joe called, grinning. "That pole's likely to throw you!"

Chet twisted his head to make a quick retort, and at the same time the pole caught in the brambles. The rowboat shot out from under his feet before he knew what had happened.

For one agonizing instant, Chet dangled helplessly from the end of the pole-then there was a sharp crack as the shaft broke, and he plopped into the water!

Chet rose to the surface, splashing and spluttering. On the shore, Frank and Joe were doubled up with laughter, and Bob and Dick couldn't help grinning.

Chet looked indignant.

"Don't-see-what's so-funny," he spluttered, his mouth full of water.

"You would, Chet," Joe called back, "if I could only show you a picture of yourself!"

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Dick rowed the boat close to the still-spluttering youth, and Bob reached over and pulled him in. As Dick pulled for the camp, Chet sat dejectedly in the bottom of the boat. He looked a great deal like a shaggy, half-drowned dog.

Stepping onto the shore, Chet surveyed himself dismally.

"As if I wasn't hard up for clothes already," he lamented, "*this* had to happen!"

"Never mind, Chet," Frank reassured him. "I'll drive back to Bayport and bring you a complete new set of duds."

"You will?" Chet said, relieved. "Golly, that'll be swell!"

Bob looked at Frank. "What happened today?" he asked.

"Joe will tell you about it, Bob. I've got to start back to town. See you all later."

Frank started up the hillside toward the ridge. Then, after resting briefly on the mountaintop, he climbed down the outer slope of the mountain to the dirt road where the roadster was parked.

Two hours later, when he mounted the steps of the Hardy front porch, the door was opened for him by his father.

"Dad!" the boy cried. "Gosh, I'm glad to see you! When did you get back? Is your latest case solved?"

Fenton Hardy laughed and slapped his son on the back affectionately.

48 The Secret of Skull Mountain "One question at a time," he said. "Where's Joe?"

Frank started to explain, but there was so much to tell that his words tumbled all over one another. Mr. Hardy led the boy into his study and closed the door.

"Now," he said, "suppose you start at the beginning and describe exactly what has happened."

Frank did so, and Fenton Hardy listened attentively-laughing heartily when his son came to Chet's misadventure in the rowboat.

"That's the whole story, Dad," Frank concluded. And he added gloomily, "So far, we haven't made any progress toward solving any of the mysteries!"

"I wouldn't say that, son," the famous detective replied. "Solving mysteries is pretty much a problem of elimination. The more suspects and clues you can eliminate, the closer you are to the real criminals. It seems to me you're making rather good progress in that direction."

He leaned forward significantly. "The main thing is to find the motive for the crime.

Some person, or group of persons, is causing a water shortage in Bayport. Why and how?

That's what you've got to find out. When you know the motive, you'll be well on your way to catching the criminal."

"Thanks, Dad," said Frank. "I'll remember that. What about your case? Can you tell me about it?"

Mr. Hardy frowned, then explained that he was The Missing Scientist 49

working on an assignment for the Ace Laboratories in Pomford, Illinois.

A month ago, Dr. Carl Foster, a scientist-engineer in charge of a secret project at the laboratories, had requested a week's leave of absence. His request had been granted-and the scientist had not been seen since.

The chief of the laboratories was frantic. Dr. Foster had been working on a new process that was expected to revolutionize the building industry, and without him it would be months before the work could continue.

"I questioned everyone at the laboratories, of course," Mr. Hardy went on. "I also went to the hotel where Dr. Foster had been living. The only clue I could find were these scraps of paper."

He took two torn pieces of paper from his wallet and handed them to Frank.

"They're pieces of a telegram," Frank observed.

He studied them carefully. On one of the scraps of yellow paper was a fragment of a typed word: LEN. On the other piece was typed the word BAY.

"Could BAY mean Bayport?" the boy asked.

"It could," his father admitted. "It could also mean Bay Ridge, Bay view, Hudson Bay, and a thousand and one other cities, towns, villages and waterways in North America."

Frank whistled.

"Pomford is a long way from Bayport," Mr. Hardy 50 The Secret of Skull Mountain added, "and so far, I've thought it

best to investigate places beginning and ending in BAY which are located in the vicinity of the laboratories." His face clouded. "I must confess that at the moment, Frank, I'm as much up a blind alley as you are!"

Frank grinned. "Maybe we can help each other!" he suggested.

"Maybe," his father said, smiling. "We've helped each other on cases before!"

There was a knock on the study door. It was Mrs. Hardy, and she expressed surprise at seeing Frank. The youth explained that he had returned to Bayport to obtain some clothes for Chet.

"I guess I'd better hurry out to the Morton farm," Frank said. "Chet will be in a stew until he is wearing his own clothes!"

Mrs. Hardy smiled. "Be sure to give my best wishes to the Mortons," she said. "And, Frank," she called after the retreating boy, "stop at a plumber's shop and ask if he can come out here today and repair a leaking faucet!"

"Tell him it's an emergency!" Aunt Gertrude poked her head into the hall. "We can't afford to waste a drop of water in this town!"

"Okay!" Frank called.

He waved his hand and ran across the lawn to the roadster. A short time later, he was in the business section of Bayport. He scanned a row of store fronts as he guided the car through the heavy traffic. Sud-The Missing Scientist 51

denly his eyes were arrested by a sign over one of the shops which read: "J. P. Klenger, Plumber."

Frank swung the roadster into a parking space in front of the shop and hopped out. A tiny bell tinkled as he opened the shop's door, and a surly-looking man with red hair came from the rear of the store.

He studied Frank unpleasantly as the boy told him of the leaking faucet.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" he said.

Frank stared at him in surprise.

"Fix it," he told the man somewhat heatedly.

The man turned his back on the boy abruptly and started for the rear of the shop.

"Sorry, son," he retorted coolly. "I've got more important things to do."

Frank began to boil. "What's more important for a plumber right now than to help Bayport conserve water until the reservoir is ready?" he demanded.

At the mention of the word "reservoir," the man turned abruptly and shot Frank a queer look.

"Why don't you try another plumbing shop?" he suggested, coming back. "My helper quit because there wasn't enough work. And my bookkeeper left to be married. Someone's got to be here to look after the shop."

In spite of the man's more reasonable tone, Frank .had a feeling there was something back of the plumb-52 The

Secret of Skull Mountain er's odd behavior. On a sudden inspiration, he thought of his school friend, Gallic Shaw.

"I know a girl who might be willing to take care of your shop," he told the plumber. "She could keep your books, too."

"That so?" Klenger looked interested. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Who is she?" he asked.

"Give me a pencil and a piece of paper," Frank instructed him. "I'll write down her name and address and phone, and you can arrange an interview with her."

Klenger went to a desk littered with account books and papers, and took an office letterhead from one of the drawers. He gave it to Frank, together with a Stubby pencil.

There was much more paper than Frank needed, so he tore off a piece, jotted down Gallic Shaw's name, address and phone number and handed the slip to the man. As Klenger studied it, Frank idly creased the portion of the letterhead which he still held.

The boy's glance fell on the folded paper, and his eyes widened. Dropping his hands below the counter, so Klenger could not see what he was doing, Frank quickly unfolded the sheet. The top of the letterhead read: J. P. Klenger, Plumber. Centered below it was the word: Bayport.

The boy rapidly folded the paper into its former The Missing Scientist 53

creases. The fragments of two words seemed to leap out at him: LEN BAY

Frank tried to conceal his excitement. He looked up to find Klenger staring at him. Had the man seen the folded paper?

Klenger soon dispelled the boy's fears.

"Thanks for the tip," he said shortly, holding the scrap torn from the letterhead, on which Callie's name was written. "I'll phone the girl right away."

Frank walked casually to the door and went out. But the moment Klenger could no longer see him, he dashed toward the drugstore on the corner.

He had to phone Gallic before Klenger did and make sure she accepted the job-and make certain, too, that Gallic didn't let her future employer know she was a friend of the Hardys.

Frank hastily deposited a nickel in the telephone's coin slot. *Klenger- Bayport!* Could that be the meaning of the torn pieces of the telegram Fenton Hardy had found in the wastepaper basket of Dr. Foster's hotel room? At any rate, it was a clue worth following up.

And Frank hoped to learn more about Klenger by having Gallic Shaw on the premises.

The boy hung up the receiver and bit his lips. Callie's phone was busy!

A few moments later, Frank dialed her number 54 The Secret of Skull Mountain again. This time, Gallic herself answered. Frank wasted no time on preliminaries.

"Gallic," he said abruptly. "Have you just been talking with Mr. Klenger?"

"Frank!" Gallic's voice registered surprise. Then: "What did you say?" she asked.

Frank repeated his words, a trifle impatiently.

"Why, no," Gallic told him. "I've been talking with Lola Morton. We were discussing plans for a party, and-Who is Mr. Klenger?" she asked, puzzled.

Frank told her of his visit to the plumber, and how the man had aroused his suspicions.

He did not need to go into details, for Gallic Shaw was well acquainted with the Hardy boy's sleuthing activities. Gallic and Frank were good friends, and Frank dated her whenever there was a party or a dance at Bayport High.

However, Gallic was rather startled by Frank's proposal that she become a spy in the plumbing shop.

"Oh, Frank, I'd hate to have Mr. Klenger become suspicious of me!" she told the boy.

"And suppose I get the account books all mixed up?"

When Frank assured Gallic that Klenger was mainly interested in having her take care of the shop, the girl reluctantly agreed to accept the job if he called. She promised not to reveal to Klenger that The Missing Scientist

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it was one of the Hardys who had recommended her for the job.

Leaving the phone booth, Frank stopped at the candy counter for a chocolate bar.

Suddenly, through the drugstore's plate-glass window, he saw a tall, thin man walk past.

It was the very same man Frank and Joe had seen talking to Sailor Hawkins!

Frank grabbed the chocolate bar and ran to the door.

"Hey!" the clerk called after him. "You forgot your change!"

"Keep it ["Frank yelled.

Reaching the sidewalk he started after the tall man-then ducked into the doorway of a fruit store-The man was entering Klenger's plumbing shop!

CHAPTER VII

Two Masked Men

when the man had gone inside, Frank walked past the window of the plumbing shop and peered in stealthily. He was just in time to see Klenger and the stranger disappear into the rear of the store.

Although eager to hear what the two men said, the boy knew there was no way he could do it. The moment he opened the door of the shop, the bell would tinkle and betray his presence.

The youth debated whether to watch the shop and trail the tall stranger when he came out, or report new developments to his father. He decided in favor of the latter, for it seemed likely that Klenger was in some way involved with the disappearance of the scientist-and Fenton Hardy would want to know about him as soon as possible.

Frank jumped into the roadster and headed for home.

Mr. Hardy approved of his decision when he heard his son's story.

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Two Masked Men 57

"If Klenger and the thin man are mixed up in Dr. Foster's disappearance," he pointed out, "they'll meet again."

"And if they meet in the plumbing shop," Frank put in, "Gallic may learn something about them." His brow wrinkled in thought. "Do you suppose Klenger sent that telegram, Dad?"

"I don't know," Mr. Hardy deliberated. "But I'm going to do my best to find out."

Mr. Hardy promised to keep in touch with Gallic and, after eating his share of a huge dinner cooked by Aunt Gertrude, Frank again drove toward the Morton farm.

It was getting late and he was in a hurry to return to the camp. He had hoped to pack a few clothes for Chet and resume his trip without delay. But Chet's mother and father and his sister Lola insisted on hearing how the Morton heir had lost his clothes.

It was growing dark when Frank finally headed the roadster toward Skull Mountain. He swung the car into the highway and stepped on the gas. The needle of the speedometer pointed to forty-five, and he let it remain there. After about fifteen minutes, Frank slowed down and turned off the concrete highway onto the dirt road which lead to the Tarnack River region. He had gone only a short distance when suddenly, in the mirror, he saw the glare of a single headlight approaching from behind.

The light bore down on him with increasing 58 The Secret of Skull Mountain speed, and Frank realized it was the headlight of a motorcycle.

"Oh-oh!" Frank told himself. "A state trooper!"

He slowed down, glancing at the speedometer as he did so.

"That's funny," he muttered. "I never knew a trooper handed you a ticket for driving twenty on a country road."

The motorcycle drew abreast of the roadster-and Frank's surprise was complete. There were two riders-both wearing masks!

"Pull over!" the driver ordered, waving to the side of the road.

Frank considered swiftly. There was a chance he could outrace the motorcycle and escape.

As if guessing his intention, the second masked man drew a gun from his pocket and pointed it at the youth.

Frank swung the car to the side of the road and turned off the ignition.

The motorcycle immediately halted alongside, and the two men got off. One of them was short with a thick, muscular body. Frank's heart quickened. The other-the driver of the motorcycle-was tall and thin!

"Get out of the car!" the thin man ordered.

Frank glanced at the pistol, which the short man still pointed at him, and obeyed. He tried to dis-

tinguish the features of the two men, but their hat-brims were pulled low and their masks successfully concealed their eyes, noses and mouths.

"What's the idea?" Frank asked.

"You're Fenton Hardy's kid," the thin man stated. He went on as Frank did not deny it.

"What's your father doing about the old man's disappearance?"

Frank studied him alertly.

"What old man?" he asked.

"Don't give us that," the thin man snapped. "You know who we mean. What's Hardy found out about him?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Frank told him.

The man looked at him for a moment, then shrugged.

"There's a way to make stubborn boys talk," he said. "For example-a slug in the jaw by a guy wearing brass knuckles." He turned to the short man. "Show the kid what I mean," he ordered.

"Sure, Sweeper."

Frank's eyes desperately searched the dirt road for an approaching car. But not a single pair of headlights glimmered in the gathering dusk.

"Another thing," Sweeper went on, "stop nosing into other people's business on the mountain. There are plenty of graves up there-but there's always room for one or two more!"

His companion uttered a low oath. His left hand 60 The Secret of Skull Mountain was caught in the pocket of his coat, and he was using his gun hand to free it.

Instantly, Frank sprang toward some bushes which bordered the road.

"Get him!" he heard Sweeper cry.

Frank ducked instinctively and lunged low behind the bushes. He felt a stunning impact as his head struck a rock. The next moment, everything went black!

CHAPTER VIII

Council of War

Frank had no idea how long he had lain unconscious. When he regained his senses, his head was throbbing and there was a painful gash on his forehead.

He touched it gingerly, then shook his head to clear his brain. As if from a great distance, he heard the sound of voices-then realized they were only a few feet away, on the other side of the bushes. Sweeper and the short man were searching the car!

Footsteps approached, and the boy shrank back against the grass, feigning unconsciousness. Through almost closed eyes, he saw the two men staring down at him.

"Come on," Sweeper said at last. "We can't get any information out of him."

Frank waited until he heard the roar of their motorcycle. It misfired, then disappeared into the night with a peculiar uneven rhythm.

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62 The Secret or Skull Mountain Frank stood up shakily and went back to the car. There was evidence of a search in the open compartments and the litter of keys, flashlight bulbs and crumpled papers and maps on the seat.

Frank started the motor and guided the car onto the dirt road. Around a bend in the road he saw a farmhouse, and stopped to ask permission to use the phone.

Fenton Hardy himself answered the call.

"What's wrong, son?" he queried with immediate concern.
"You sound as if you're sick."

"Not sick, Dad," Frank replied. "Just a little shaky. But I'll be all right."

He told his father of the holdup. Mr. Hardy was greatly interested in Frank's description of the men and the possibility that one of them might be the tall, thin stranger Frank had seen on the mountain and later entering Klenger's shop.

"It looks to me, Dad," the boy said, "as if the mystery of the disappearing water is tied up somehow to your disappearing scientist!"

"It certainly does, Frank," the detective agreed. "And it looks as if Bayport was the place named in the telegram after all!"

Frank hung up, after promising his father to be careful, and paid the farmer for the call.

But the farmer's wife refused to allow the boy to leave the house until she had applied a

bandage to his cut forehead.

It was late when Frank arrived at Carpenter's Council of War
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camp. There had been a rain squall on the mountain that afternoon, and the narrow, slippery trail made climbing slow and dangerous.

Joe and Chet greeted him with enthusiasm, which changed to concern when they saw the bandage on his forehead.

"What happened?" Joe asked.

Frank told them, beginning with Mr. Hardy's return home and concluding with the masked holdup.

"Zowie!" Chet exclaimed, shaking his head wonderingly. "Everything happens to you!"

Frank grinned, and gave his friend the package of clothes he had brought.

"Here, Chet," he said. "Now you can join Joe and me when we go after those holdup men."

"Huh?" Chet gulped. "Not me!" he declared, cradling the package in his arms and walking toward his tent. "I'm too delicate for strong-arm stuff!"

The Hardy boys laughed. Frank looked around and noticed that the two engineers were not in camp.

"Where are Bob and Dick?" he asked.

"They went down toward the dam," Joe replied. "This afternoon Bob painted a white stripe on a slab of rock, to mark the water level. They've gone to see whether the water line is the same as it was earlier in the day."

As the boys walked toward their tents, Joe brought 64 The Secret of Skull Mountain Frank up to date on his activities. That afternoon he had seen another column of smoke rising from the crest of the mountain. Joe had located the spot carefully with his eyes, but when he had climbed to the spot,

two hours later, he had been unable to find any trace of a fire.

"It was the same old story," he concluded gloomily, "I got nowhere fast!"

Chet ducked his head out of his pup tent.

"Hey!" he called. "How about some chow? I'm starved!"

With Chet leading the way, the boys went to the shack familiarly known as "Carpenter's Cottage." There, after a late snack of sandwiches, soda pop and what remained of Aunt Gertrude's cake, Frank called a council of war.

"For the past few days," he said, "the water shortage has been a serious problem, fellows. But now it's becoming dangerous. I hope Bob finds the leak in the reservoir before much more time goes by!"

"You said it," Chet agreed. "But how?"

"All we're sure of," Joe pointed out, "is that Potato Annie and Sailor Hawkins are determined to save their homes and would do anything to keep the water out of the valley."

"I'm convinced that there are more important people than the squatters interested in keeping Tarnack Reservoir from filling," Frank told him. "I think we've got to look for something that ties Council of War 65

in with Dr. Foster, the scientist Dad is searching for."

Chet crammed another sandwich into his mouth.

"You mean that secret process Dr. Foster was working on when he disappeared could be tied up in some way with

Skull Mountain?" he mumbled.

"Possibly," Frank said, smiling.

"I don't see the connection," Joe disagreed.

"I don't either, Joe-yet," said his brother. "But everything I found out today points to a tie-up between Klenger, Dr. Foster and the thin man called Sweeper. And we *saw* the thin man on the mountain!"

"That's true," Joe nodded. "But what about Bob's theory?" he demanded after a moment. "Bob's still convinced the water is running out through an underground channel."

"I don't believe there is any old tunnel," Chet grumbled. "I poked away at every likely spot along the shore with that old pole and nothing happened."

"Nothing but a ducking," Joe reminded him with a grin.

Chet sniffed.

"There's got to be a tunnel," Frank said determinedly.

"There's no other way for the water to escape."

"Uh-huh," Joe scoffed. "But where is it? It doesn't start in the river bed, or the men who built the dam would have discovered it. And Bob and 66 The Secret of Skull Mountain Dick and Chet have searched along the sides of the reservoir."

"Yes, I know," Frank admitted. Then suddenly a thought struck him. "Wait a minute!" he said excitedly.

"What is it?" Joe wanted to know.

Frank looked at him. "Didn't Dick say the water rises in the reservoir in the daytime?"

Joe nodded. "But he said it never rises above twenty feet."

"And remember when Bob picked up the shingles after he'd planted them?"

"Sure," said Joe. "It was just before nightfall."

"Then that's it!" Frank exclaimed excitedly.

"That's what?" Chet interrupted.

Frank turned to him. "If there *is* an underground channel," he explained, "and I'm betting my bottom dollar that there is-it's draining the water off at night! That's why the shingles didn't reveal any currents that would indicate where the water is escaping!"

"Why wouldn't the tunnel drain off the water in the daytime, too?" Joe objected.

Frank shrugged. "There you've got me. But there's one way to prove whether the geologist Bob told us about had the correct theory about an underground channel. That's by planting some stuff in the reservoir at night!"

"And if the tunnel exists, the stuff will be carried Council of War 67

through and we can watch for it at the other end!" Joe finished, reflecting Frank's excitement.

"But where is the other end?" asked Chet skeptically.

"According to the book Bob read, the underground river emptied into the bay at Bayport," Frank replied. "But since

then the whole coast line in this area has been sinking.

The river mouth could be away out in the bay now."

The boys were silent for a moment, each considering the possibilities of the plan. If it worked, they'd be much closer to solving the mystery.

"Hey!" Chet said suddenly. "I smell smoke!"

The boys sniffed.

"See if something's burning on the stove, Chet," Frank suggested.

Chet rose heavily from his chair and went to the stove.

"Nothing here," he reported.

Chet started back, then stared. Wisps of smoke were curling through the floor boards of the wooden shack!

"Fire!" he yelled, pointing to the floor.

Frank and Joe leaped to their feet.

"Come on, Frank!" yelled Joe. "It's under the floor!"

"Take that bucket of water with you!" Frank ordered, pointing behind his brother.

Joe grabbed up the bucket as Frank ran for the 68 The Secret of Skull Mountain door. The elder Hardy boy pulled on the knob, but the door refused to open. He pulled again with all his strength.

"Chet!" he gasped. "Give me a hand!"

Young Morton also gripped the doorknob, and together they strained at it.

"It must be jammed," Frank breathed. "It won't budge!"

"Try the windows!" Joe shouted.

They ran to the two windows in the shack, then drew back. Flames were already licking the window sills!

Joe emptied the water bucket on them, but the flames continued to mount. The boys looked at one another. They were trapped!

CHAPTER IX

The Man of the Mountain

desperately, the boys looked around for a means of escape. Lifting a chair, Frank hammered at the wooden door-but it would not yield.

A tongue of flame shot under the door and licked greedily at the floor. Smoke curled thickly through the cracks in the shack, and a burning shingle dropped from the roof.

The smoke made the boys' eyes water, and they began to cough.

Then, just when it seemed there was no way out, they heard excited voices-and a moment later, the blade of an axe bit through a plank in the door! "It's Bob!" Joe cried.

"Boy, will I be glad to see him!" Chet spluttered weakly.

The three youths grinned at one another, their eyes shining with joy and relief.

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70 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Grab anything of value you can lay your hands on!" Frank instructed.

The boys scurried around the small room, stacking their arms with clothes, food and engineering instruments.

Blows from Bob's axe had split the wood at the jamb. An instant later, the door was flung back, and the boys ran out into the open. They dropped their bundles and breathed deeply, filling their lungs with fresh mountain air.

Bob and Dick watched them anxiously.

"What happened?" Bob asked.

"That's what we'd like to know!" Joe declared.

"A fire started under the shack," Frank told the Sail engineer.
"And when we ran to put it out, we discovered the door was jammed!"

"It wasn't jammed," Dick put in. "It was padlocked!"

"Padlocked!" Joe gasped.

"Yes," Bob said grimly. "Someone snapped the lock shut while you were inside!"

"And then set fire to the shack!" Frank added slowly.

"Golly," said Chet. "Who would do a thing like that?"

"Anyone of a number of people who want to drive us out of this region," Dick replied bitterly.

They stared at the shack. It was completely in flames now, and as they watched, the roof fell in. They waited until the fire died down and the shack The Man of the Mountain 71

was a black, smoldering ruin, then carefully searched the ground around it for a clue to the incendiary's identity.

There were several footprints in the soft earth, but none that they could recognize.

Joe set his mouth determinedly as they gave up their search.

"That makes one more score we've got to settle with-with-"
He broke off helplessly.

"With whom?" Frank teased him.

Joe grinned sheepishly. "I don't know," he admitted. Then he added belligerently, "But you can bet someone's going to pay for this!"

The boys helped Bob and Dick carry the articles they had salvaged from the shack to their pup tents. In the space adjoining, the two engineers pitched tents of their own-part of

the camping equipment they had stored in the shack.

Bob told the boys of the white stripe he had painted on a rock to mark the water level of the reservoir that afternoon. When he and Dick had gone to look at it that night, the level of the water was one foot under the mark. But the rock itself was damp for four feet above the stripe!

"During the afternoon," the engineer stated, "the water rose four feet! But after dark, five feet of water had drained away!"

"Maybe the rock above the mark was damp from the storm," Frank suggested.

"Uh-uh," Bob shook his head. "Dick and I 72 The Secret of Skull Mountain checked that. The rocks higher up were dry!"

Frank wanted to tell the engineers about the plan to plant articles in the reservoir at night, but he did not wish to arouse their hopes only to have the experiment end in failure. He caught Joe's eye, and the younger Hardy silently agreed not to mention the plan.

Early the next day, Frank and Joe set out along one side of the reservoir, keeping a few feet above the water.

Behind them trudged Chet. The latter had again aired his conviction that the underground outlet did not exist, but he did not want to miss out on the excitement in the event the boys found it.

The slope at the water's edge was dotted with rocks, patches of shrubs and creeping vines which extended under the water. Any one of these patches of fallen rocks and foliage, the boys felt, might conceal the mouth of the tunnel.

They prodded the brambles with long sticks, but tearing away the thickly matted branches and leaves was a long, tortuous and hopelessly unrewarding process.

Chet sat down on the ground and wiped his forehead.

"Wow, is it hot!" he declared. He shifted his position, then leaped from the spot where he had been sitting as if he had been shot. "Ouch!" he yelled The Man of the Mountain 73

He put his hand to the seat of his pants and gingerly pulled out a huge thorn. Chet looked at it with disgust.

"That's what I get for letting you two talk me into hunting for that old tunnel!" he declared.

"Wha-at?" Joe challenged him. "Coming with us was your own idea!"

Chet plunked himself down on a flat slab of rock, taking considerable care that it was free of thorny brambles.

"You could've said 'no,' " he pointed out reasonably.

Joe turned to his brother. "What can you do with a guy like that?" he asked.

Frank looked speculatively at the water. "We might duck him," he suggested.

"We might at that," Joe agreed, his eyes lighting up at the idea.

Chet blanched. "Don't you dare!" he pleaded, attempting to wriggle to his feet.

"Come on, Joe. Grab him!" Frank yelled.

Laughingly, the Hardy boys took hold of their friend, Frank clutching Chet's struggling arms and shoulders and Joe holding his feet.

They started to swing the spluttering youth toward the water.

"One!" Frank counted. "Two-"

Suddenly they heard a crashing noise above them!

They turned their heads swiftly. Two hundred 74 The Secret of Skull Mountain feet above them, a giant boulder was hurtling down the hillside straight at them!

Instantly the boys set Chet on his feet, but the fground was too rough and the vines too thick. They couldn't get clear of the boulder's path in time!

"Flatten out!" Frank shouted, throwing himself down in the thick foliage and burying his head in his arms.

Joe and Chet at once followed suit.

A moment later, the boulder roared down upon them. Then at the last split second it struck the very rock on which Chet had been sitting, bounded over the boys' prostrate bodies and splashed into the water!

Frank stood up, his face grim.

"Come on!" he told the others.

They raced up the hillside to the place where the boulder had broken loose. There was no one there.

The boys stared hard at the slope in every direction. It seemed impossible that anyone could escape so quickly.

"He must be hiding in a clump of shrubbery," Joe decided.

"We'll have a look," said Frank.

They searched the thickets near by but finally were forced to admit defeat.

Chet, who had gone back to the place where the boulder had been launched, suddenly gave a cry.

"Hey, look!"

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Frank and Joe ran to where he was standing. Grinning at them from a near-by rock was a human skull!

"The mountain man!" Joe exclaimed.

"It looks as though he's the one who sent that boulder on its way," Frank said slowly.

He studied the ground carefully for footprints, but it was a stretch of solid rock.

Chet grimaced as Joe picked up the skull.

"I don't know about you two," Chet said, "but the sooner I'm back in Bayport, the better I'll like it!"

He sat down heavily on the rock, with a suspicious glance over his shoulder to make certain that no more boulders were heading in his direction. Frank and Joe joined him.

Some time later, as they sat there, they saw a column of smoke rising from the crest of the mountain. Despite Chet's protests and dire predictions, the Hardy boys decided to make another attempt to find the source of those smoke signals-if that was what they were.

"Okay," Chet assented grumpily. "But if somebody tries to mash us with another rock, don't blame me!"

They started up the slope toward the smoking crest of Skull Mountain, and soon found themselves skirting the fertile shelf that was Potato Annie's garden. The old woman had been pulling turnips, carrots and beets, and as they watched she swung a wicker basket laden with the vegetables over her arm and hobbled across the hillside.

"Wonder where she's taking those vegetables?" Joe mused.

"Certainly not to Bayport," Frank said. "It's too far away."

"She's not heading toward town, anyway," Chet pointed out.

"You're right."

Frank stared after the retreating figure, then resumed his climb toward the mountain crest. Some other time he and Joe would have to investigate the old woman's activities more thoroughly.

Climbing steadily, the three youths finally arrived at the edge of the woods. Directly below them was Sailor Hawkins' cabin. The boys saw no sign of the old seaman, but as they were about to leave the clearing and enter the woods a shot rang out, "Ohmygosh!" Chet yelled. "What was that?"

They looked behind them. Sailor Hawkins was standing outside his cabin with a still-smoking rifle. He shook his fist at them.

"Get off me land!" he roared. "Ye no-good swabs!"

The boys hurriedly stepped into the woods and turned in time to see Hawkins disappear into his cabin.

"Who's he?" Chet demanded.

"Oh, just a friend." Joe replied airily.

The Man of the Mountain 77

"Some friends you've got!" Chet reported ag-grievedly. "When they're not throwing rocks at you, they're throwing bullets!"

Frank and Joe laughed. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't help ribbing their companion. They started once more in the direction of the smoke-but when they looked for it, they saw that it had disappeared!

"Now what?" Joe groaned.

Frank considered. "We've come this far, so we may as well keep going," he decided.

Joe was dubious but agreed to keep on with the search. They had no sooner resumed their climb, however, when they heard the sound of an axe striking wood.

The Hardy boys looked at one another excitedly. The sound came from the forest-and it was not more than a few hundred yards away!

"Come on!" Frank cried.

Half running in their eagerness, the three youths made their way through the trees toward the sound. Except for the echoing blows of the axe, the forest was strangely still.

They clambered over scattered rocks and carefully skirted a cliff. Then, as the sound of the axe grew louder, they crept forward cautiously.

They were halfway to the spot where they estimated the sound was coming from, then it suddenly stopped.

78 The Secret of Skull Mountain The boys halted and stared ahead anxiously. Had their progress been detected?

They waited a moment for the chopping to resume. When it didn't, Frank broke into a run. Joe and Chet followed suit, and soon they came to a small clearing.

Frank pointed. At the edge of the clearing were the stumps of several freshly cut trees.

He went over to them and examined the ground, "Look here," he said.

Joe's eyes followed his finger. Pressed into the soft earth were the footprints of the man with the missing toe!

Chet eyed the prints over Joe's shoulder.

"Jumping Juniper!" he cried. "Those are just like the footprints we found in my tent!"

Frank traced the prints for a short distance and saw that they followed a narrow dirt path.

"Come on!" he called. "This way!"

Walking stealthily now, for they had no idea how close they were to their quarry, the boys trailed the mysterious prints. Once they lost them-but Joe found a fresh-cut tree limb the man apparently had dropped, and they soon picked up the trail.

As they hurried forward, Chet's eyes fell on a pocketknife, lying beside a tree. He stared at it, disbelievingly. Engraved on it were the initials *Ce M.!*

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"Hey!" he shouted. "Look what I found!"

Frank and Joe joined their friend.

"It's my knife!" he told them. "I had it in the pocket of the pants that were stolen!"

"Swell, Chet!" Joe congratulated him. "If we can catch up with this guy, maybe you'll get back your clothes!"

Buoyed up by their find, the boys went ahead with new eagerness. The soft earth of the path made the footprints easy to follow and they made rapid progress. But suddenly the path swung to the left and the footprints vanished.

Puzzled, the boys studied the ground intently. Obviously the man had left the path and struck out over the grass. But in which direction?

As if answering their question, they heard an almost inaudible sound a short distance to their right. Putting his finger to his lips, Frank signaled the others to follow him. They crept forward quietly, shielding themselves as much as possible behind trees.

A moment later, Frank held up his hand. In a small clearing directly ahead was a man!

He was sitting on a fallen bough-a gaunt-faced man so thin that his bones seemed to be protruding from his flesh.

Long, shaggy hair hung over his face and neck, and he scratched at a thick, unkempt beard. He was 80 The Secret of Skull Mountain eating a turnip-gulping it down without taking the time to chew it-and on the ground beside him lay a dozen pieces of split wood and an axe.

Chet's eyes suddenly popped. The man was bare-armed, the sleeves having been torn from his tattered shirt, and barelegged. But around his waist was belted a new pair of khaki shorts.

"My pants!" Chet yelled.

The man stood up swiftly, dropping the half-eaten turnip. He fixed the boys with a fierce stare. Then he grabbed the axe and fled into the woods with a shrill, cackling laugh!

CHAPTER X

Klenger Disappears

"after him!" shouted Joe.

The boys raced after the fleeing figure, but they soon saw that their efforts were useless.

The tall, bony creature darted through the woods as if the devil were chasing him-his arms flapping, his long hair flying, and his knees pumping like pistons.

When the grotesque figure disappeared in the woods, the boys saw that further pursuit was out of the question.

"Well, at least we know he's the man with the missing toe," Frank said, as the boys came to a stop.

"Sure-and he stole my clothes!" Chet added heatedly.

"In a way, I don't blame him," Joe put in, grinning. "He looks like he needs them much more than you do!"

"Huh!" Chet sniffed. He shook his head sadly.

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82 The Secret of Skull Mountain "My best pair of khaki shorts!" he said plaintively.

The Hardy boys laughed.

"Cheer up, Chet," Frank told him. "Maybe we can raise a fund to buy you another pair."

Chet brightened, and the talk turned once more to the strange man of the mountain. It was obvious now that he was responsible for setting off the explosion close to the boys'

tents; and the firewood he had cut undoubtedly was the source of the smoke they had seen.

But who he was, and what was behind his actions, and where the wood was being burned remained as much a mystery as ever.

"Probably a hermit," Frank said, in answer to the first question.

"He sure looked like one," Joe agreed.

"Well, whoever he is, I'd sure hate to meet him in these woods on a dark night," Chet remarked. "Especially if he was toting some skulls!"

Back at the camp, the boys waited for Bob and Dick to arrive, so they could tell them of their encounter with the hermit. But when considerable time had passed, and the engineers still had not arrived, Frank and Joe decided to go ahead with their plan for the reservoir.

Two hours later, the Hardy boys, accompanied by Chet, walked down the slope to the water where Bob's skiff was moored. In their arms they carried an assortment of queer-looking articles—a decoy duck painted white, with the initials *F* and *J* daubed Klenger Disappears 83

on the sides in red; a slab of yellow pine, with the same initials carved in the wood and painted red; and a barrel stave painted white and daubed with red stripes.

Chet glanced around apprehensively as Frank rowed the skiff over the murky water. The squeak of the oars, and the trickle of water from the blades were the only sounds the boys heard in the night.

"Let her ride," Joe said, as the boat swung close to the opposite shore.

Frank hauled in the oars, and Joe dropped the duck in the water.

Frank rowed on, keeping the skiff a few feet from the shore. Then Joe and Chet dropped overboard the painted yellow-pine board, and finally the barrel stave.

It was late when they finished circling the reservoir, but they had the satisfaction of knowing that if the underground channel existed, at least one of their articles was bound to be sucked into it.

"How long do you suppose it will take for *the* junk to go through the tunnel?" asked Joe.

Frank thought for a moment, then he said, "Of course, we don't know for sure where the stream comes out. The geological guy in the book Bob Carpenter read thought the stream flowed into the bay down near Bayport."

"That's twenty miles-"

Frank interrupted. "-as the crow flies. But how 84 The Secret of Skull Mountain do we know the underground channel takes the most direct way? And how do we know there aren't ledges and rocks and obstructions on which the things we've dumped in here will get caught?"

"Besides," said Joe, "we have to remember that the water is actually flowing through the old stream bed only a few hours at night."

"That's right," agreed Frank. "If this thing were a straight flume or chute like a millrace, the things we planted could get to the bay, if that's where it ends, in a couple of hours. But my guess would be that it will be more like a couple of days."

Joe nodded. "All the same, we had better plan to make a search for the stuff as soon as we can. The tide could carry it out of the bay, and then we'd never know."

Frank hooked the skiff to its mooring line and stepped ashore.

"Well, that's that," he said, looking out over the water. "What say we drive back to Bayport?"

"Suits me," Joe replied.

"Me, too," Chet chimed in. He glanced at his watch. "I wonder if Aunt Gertrude will feel like a midnight snack?" he asked innocently.

Joe grinned. "She will if you ask her!"

Chet started toward the tents. "Then let's get going!" he called over his shoulder. "We haven't much time!"

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They packed a few things they would need, and Frank wrote a note to Bob and Dick telling them about the hermit and saying the boys would return in a day or two. He propped up

the note on Bob's cot, where the engineer would be sure to see it.

Aunt Gertrude was in bed reading when the Hardy boys drove up to the house in their roadster. But when she heard how Chet had set his heart on having a slice of her pie or cake before going home, she good-naturedly put on a robe and came right down.

Soon, Frank and Joe, as well as Chet, were wolfing sandwiches, gulping milk and attacking generous slices of cherry pie.

Aunt Gertrude looked at them with astonishment.

"What in the world have you been doing up there in the mountain?" she demanded. "You act as if you haven't eaten for a week!"

Frank told her a few of the things that had happened to them, and his aunt clucked disapprovingly. Although she tried not to show it, the maiden lady worried constantly about the boys' activities, and it was always a relief to her when they were safe at home.

"Where's Dad?" Joe asked finally.

"He had a telephone call this evening and went out," Aunt Gertrude said. "He said he wouldn't be back until tomorrow."

86 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Was the call about the Foster case?" Frank questioned her eagerly.

"I don't know," she replied tartly. "You ought to know by now that your father doesn't confide in me about his work."

Chet ate the last crumb of his pie and looked wistfully at his empty plate. Then he stood up with a sigh.

"I gotta be going," he announced to the boys. "See you tomorrow." He beamed at Aunt Gertrude. "Thanks for the pie."

The next day the boys were at breakfast when the telephone rang.

Mrs. Hardy answered the call.

"It's Gallic," she told Frank. "She says she must see you right away!"

"Where is she?" Frank asked, pushing back his chair.

"She's in a drugstore a few doors from Mr. Klenger's plumbing shop," his mother went on. "She says she has some important news for you!"

"I better get right over!" Frank said excitedly, thrusting his arms into the sleeves of his jacket.

"I'll go with you!" Joe put in promptly.

"Okay-but hurry!" Frank called, rushing out the door. "I'll get the car!"

Frank found an empty parking space in front of the drugstore and expertly jockeyed the roadster into it. Gallic ran to meet them as the boys got out.

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"What happened?" Frank asked worriedly. "You look frightened!"

"I am," Gallic said. "At least, I was," she amended with a little laugh. "I'm getting over it, now."

She looked nervously up and down the street, then beckoned the two boys into the doorway of a vacant store where they could not easily be seen.

"Mr. Klenger fired me this morning," Gallic said, as soon as they were off the sidewalk.

Frank's eyes widened. "What for?" he asked.

"He caught me copying down a telegram he'd received," Gallic explained. "He was furious. I never saw a man so mad in my life!"

"What did the telegram say?" Joe queried her eagerly.

"Mr. Klenger tore up the copy I was making," Gallic told him, "but I remember the words." She wrinkled her brow in thought as Frank and Joe waited on tenterhooks for the message. "It went like this," Gallic said.

"Wait," Frank said hurriedly. "I'll write them down."

He took a small notebook and a pencil from his pocket.

"Okay, shoot!"

"The message said: 'Syndicate convinced you are stalling. What's wrong? Can Retsof deliver? When?' And it was signed 'Ben.' "

88 The Secret of Skull Mountain Frank scribbled the last words of the message, and the two Hardy boys studied them with puzzled frowns.

"Retsof," Frank mused. "Sounds like a Russian name."

"Maybe it's a code name," Joe suggested.

"Could be," Frank agreed, studying the word thoughtfully.
"I've got it!" he cried suddenly.

"It's Foster spelled backward!"

Joe's eyes glistened.

"That's definite proof Klenger is mixed up in Dr. Foster's disappearance!" he crowed.

The boys grinned at one another with rising excitement.

"Where did the message come from, Gallic?" Frank questioned the pretty brown-haired girl.

"Chicago," she answered promptly. "It arrived this morning."

"What did Klenger say when he caught you copying it?"

"He called me a snooper, Frank! He said he just wouldn't have nosey people around.

He said I was through."

"When did all this happen?" asked Frank.

"It happened just after a man came to see Mr. Klenger," Gallic went on.

"A tall, thin man?" Frank asked quickly.

"Yes," Gallic said, surprised. "Mr. Klenger called him 'Sweeper.' "

Klenger Disappears oy "I thought so," Frank remarked grimly. "Sweeper is the man we saw on the mountain, talking to Sailor Hawkins," he told Joe, "and one of the men who held me up," he added.

Frank thought for a moment. "Maybe we'd better have a talk with Klenger," he decided finally.

"You can't!" Gallic cried. "He closed his shop right after he fired me. He said he was leaving town!"

The boys stared at her with dismay. If Klenger left Bayport, they might never locate the key to the two mysteries!

They drove Gallic home. There Frank asked for the telephone directory.

"I'm going to look up Klenger's address," he told Joe. "If he told Gallic the truth, maybe he's still home packing."

Frank wrote down Klenger's street and number, and a moment later he swung the roadster in the direction of the house.

It was a frame house, set back from the street by a short lawn. As the boys went up the steps to the porch, they saw that the window shades were drawn.

Frank rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. Joe tried to peer through a window, but the shade completely shut off his view.

They returned to the car, and as he got in Joe looked over his shoulder. Was it his imagination-•

90 The Secret of Skull Mountain or for a moment had he actually seen a woman's face staring at the boys from an

upstairs window?

He told Frank about the face, and his brother deliberated.

"If it was Klenger's wife," he said thoughtfully, "he can't have gone away for good. We'll go back some other time and try our luck."

Mr. Hardy had returned when the boys arrived home. They showed him Frank's copy of the telegram Klenger had received, and he studied it with great care.

"There's no doubt now that Klenger is a man we've got to watch," the detective said.

Frank told him of the possibility that Klenger had left Bayport, and his father frowned.

"I'll check on that."

Mr. Hardy reached for the phone.

"Get me long-distance-Chicago," he told the operator. He glanced at the telegram on his desk. "I'm going to try to trace the sender of this message," he explained to the boys.

Frank and Joe left their father to complete his call.

"You know something?" asked Frank when they were outside the study door. "The sooner we take the *Sleuth* and begin to look for the articles we dropped into the reservoir last evening the better. The tide will be going out in another hour."

"Let's go," Joe replied.

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They drove to the boathouse where they kept their speedboat. Frank stepped into the cockpit of the trim little craft and pushed the starter button.

The motor failed to catch at first, and Frank put out his hand to try again. But before he made contact, the boys heard the roar of a motorcycle as it came to a stop behind the boathouse.

The machine's motor misfired, then sputtered loudly with a peculiar, uneven rhythm. A moment later, it stopped.

Joe saw a tense look come over his brother's face.

"What is it, Frank?" he asked quickly.

"That motorcycle!" Frank whispered. "It sounds like the machine Sweeper was riding the night he held me up!"

CHAPTER XI

A Visit to Brookside

Frank leaped from the *Sleuth* and ran toward the rear of the boathouse. Joe followed, close on his brother's heels.

The motorcycle was parked in a shed, but its rider was nowhere to be seen.

Frank's eyes quickly scanned the shed. In a corner of the flimsy building was a door leading to the boat landing.

"He must have gone that way!" the youth said.

He flung open the door and they rushed out on the landing. A few feet away, a tall, thin man stood at the wheel of a speedboat.

"It's Sweeper!" Frank exclaimed excitedly.

The boys heard the sputtering roar of a motor, and the craft curved out into the bay.

"Come on!" Frank cried, racing for the *Sleuth*, "*We'll follow him!*"

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"Go ahead, Frank!" Joe yelled after him. "I'll *try* to trace the owner of the motorcycle!"

Frank waved his hand, making an okay sign with his thumb and forefinger. A moment later, the *Sleuth* sped away from

the landing and roared in pursuit of the other craft.

Joe went back to the shed and examined the motorcycle carefully. There was a leather pouch attached to the seat, but it contained only a pair of goggles and a few greasy rags.

He studied the license plate. It was the familiar red-and-black license issued by the adjoining state.

"Well, that's something," he told himself, memorizing the number.

Returning to the roadster, he headed for the Hardy home. Luckily, Mr. Hardy was still there, and Joe apprised him of the new developments.

In fifteen minutes, Fenton Hardy had the information his son needed. The motorcycle's license had been issued to Mr. Timothy Kimball of Brookside.

"Brookside!" Joe exclaimed. "That's just across the state line! I could drive there in an hour!"

"What will you do when you get there?" his father asked.

"Why, I-I'll-" Joe stopped, nonplussed. "Golly," he said, thrusting his fingers through his hair, "I hadn't thought of that!"

"It's best to plan before you act," the detective 94 The Secret of Skull Mountain advised him. "Kimball may be the man in the speedboat-the one called Sweeper. Or the motorcycle may have been borrowed by a friend of Kimball's-or by someone in Kimball's employ."

"Maybe the motorcycle was stolen from Mr. Kimball," Joe suggested.

"Maybe," Mr. Hardy admitted. "The point is, you may have to rely on Kimball's word."

"That's true," Joe said slowly.

"Your best bet is to find out all you can about Kimball before you see him," the boy's father went on. He scribbled something on a slip of paper and handed it to Joe. "Here's the name of the city editor of the *Brookside News*. He's an old friend of mine. If anyone can give you information about Timothy Kimball, he can."

"Thanks, Dad," the boy said gratefully. "I'll talk to him."

One hour later, Joe stepped into the offices of the *Brookside News*. He walked past reporters busily tapping out the day's news on their typewriters, rushing copy boys, jangling phones and clicking teletype machines.

Beyond the main office was a door lettered "Tom Taylor, City Editor." Joe opened the door and went in.

Tom Taylor was a huge, red-faced man who chewed savagely on a fat cigar and issued

orders to his secretary in a voice that was close to a bark.
But A Visit to Brookside 95

when Joe introduced himself, the editor became surprisingly genial.

"So you're Fenton Hardy's boy!" He studied the youth keenly. "Your Dad and I have tackled some cases together." He grew suddenly businesslike. "What can I do for you?"

Joe told him.

' 'Kimball, eh?" Tom Taylor chewed thoughtfully on his cigar. "I guess I can give you a few facts about him." He turned to his secretary. "Mary, get me the clips on Timothy Kimball."

A few minutes later, a sheaf of news clippings from the morgue-the reference file room of the newspaper-was placed on Taylor's desk.

The city editor scanned the clippings quickly. "Timothy Kimball," he recited. "Age, sixty-five. Occupation: President of the Kimball Construction Company. Has a son, Timothy, Jr.-"

"How old is the son?" Joe interrupted.

"Thirty-one," Taylor told him.

Joe repressed a feeling of excitement. The man called Sweeper was just about that age!

"I happen to know Timothy, Jr. is a pretty worthless sort," the editor said. "He's given his father a great deal of trouble-passing bad checks, getting involved with shady characters and generally making life miserable for the old man."

Joe listened attentively. This information, too, seemed to tie in with the thin man!

96 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Kimball thought responsibility might straighten out his son so he made him manager of the company," Tom Taylor continued, "but I understand the experiment has been pretty much of a dud. Young Kimball is too shiftless to stick at a job."

He pushed the clippings away from him. "Anything else you need to know?" he asked.

"No, thanks!" Joe replied. "That's plenty!"

He copied down the address of the Kimball Construction Company, shook hands with the city editor and departed.

Twenty minutes later, he stood in the Kimball Company's reception room.

"Whom shall I say is calling?" the girl at the switchboard asked him.

"Joe Hardy."

She relayed this information to Mr. Kimball, then turned to Joe. "You may go in," she said. "Mr. Kimball's office is right through that door."

A gray-haired, ruddy-cheeked man looked up as the youth entered. He rose from his chair behind a large desk and extended his hand.

"Aren't you Mr. Hardy's son?" he said, smiling a bit nervously. "Fenton Hardy, the detective?"

Joe acknowledged that he was. Mr. Kimball motioned Joe to a chair and resumed his seat behind the desk.

"What did you come to see me about?" he asked after a moment, his hands fidgeting with a paper knife.

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"Your son," Joe wanted to say. But he decided on a more indirect approach.

"Mr. Kimball," he said, "I found a motorcycle registered in your name in Bayport. I have a hunch it was stolen."

Mr. Kimball's brows lifted. "I own such a machine," he admitted. "It's used to carry messages from my office to the field engineers. But what makes you think it's been stolen?"

"The man who was riding the motorcycle I had seen before," Joe replied tactfully, "in rather suspicious circumstances."

Mr. Kimball stared at his hands.

"What does he look like?" he asked after a while.

"He's tall and thin," Joe told him. "About thirty-one years old."

The paper knife fell from the man's fingers, and his mouth twitched.

"I'll see if there's anyone answering that description in our employ," he said slowly, picking up the phone.

He turned away from the boy and shielded his lips with his hand. Joe strained to hear what Mr. Kimball and the voice at the other end of the wire were saying, but all he could make out was a murmur.

Mr. Kimball put down the receiver and looked at the youth.

"There is such a man working for us," he said pleasantly. "But you're mistaken about the motor—"

98 The Secret of Skull Mountain cycle being stolen. He was sent to Bayport on an errand by my plant foreman." He gave a little laugh. "Doubtless your imagination was playing you

tricks when you thought you saw the young man in, er-suspicious circumstances. My foreman tells me he has a fine record."

"I see," said Joe. He paused, then added: "Would you mind telling me the man's name?"

Mr. Kimball spread his hands with a deprecating smile. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really don't think I should."

"Was it-Sweeper?" Joe put in quickly.

For an instant, the boy imagined a look of panic came into Mr. Kimball's eyes, but he shook his head firmly.

"I'm sorry-no." He glanced at a small clock on his desk, then rose. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment."

Joe stood up also. He turned as if to leave, then tried one more shot.

"Mr. Kimball," he said, "may I see a picture of your son?"

The gray-haired man stared at him.

"My son?" he stammered. "What for?"

"I have reason to believe he is the man who took the motorcycle," Joe told him quietly.

Mr. Kimball's face reddened and he took a step toward the boy.

"Get out of here!" he ordered, his voice shaking.

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"I had an idea your father sent you to question me-and now I'm sure of it! What my son does is nobody's business but his and mine!" He raised his fist threateningly. "Get out!"

Joe returned to the car. He felt his line of questioning had been a little rough on Mr.

Kimball, and he was sorry, for he sympathized with the father's loyalty to his son. But the youth was now more than ever convinced that the man called Sweeper was Timothy Kimball, Jr.!

CHAPTER XII

Search at Sea

back in Bayport, Joe was surprised to find that Frank had not returned home. Nor was Mr. Hardy there, either, having gone out on a mission of his own.

"This house is worse than a railroad station!" Aunt Gertrude stormed. "People racing in and out at all hours-and expecting Laura and me to run a twenty-four-hour restaurant service!"

Joe knew his aunt must have prepared some special dish for her brother and was afraid he would not return in time to eat it.

The boy pretended to sniff the air.

"Mmmm!" he said. "Something in this house smells mighty good!"

His aunt beamed, then set her lips.

"It's about time you noticed it!" she said tartly.

She led him into the kitchen. On the table was a plate heaped with fresh jelly doughnuts.

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"Wow!" Joe exclaimed. "You're not going to make me wait until dinner to eat one of these?"

"Humph," Aunt Gertrude sniffed. "As if I didn't know you'd steal one of them the minute my back was turned!"

She gave him a doughnut and studied his face anxiously for approval. It was not long in coming.

"Best doughnut I ever ate!" Joe told her, wolfing another bite.

"Don't talk with your mouth full!" his aunt snapped. And with a smug look at the doughnuts, she went upstairs.

Joe grinned and took another huge bite. It was a good thing Chet wasn't around, he reflected. Chet would go through that plate of doughnuts like a blitz!

Thinking of Chet reminded Joe of the decoy duck, the barrel stave and the yellow-pine board they had planted in the reservoir. It would soon be time to set up a watch in the bay, to determine whether the articles had been carried by an underground stream from the reservoir.

He dialed the number of the Morton farm. Lola answered. She told him of the party she and Gallic were planning, and made Joe promise to come and bring Frank. Then she put Chet on the phone.

"Hi, Chet," Joe said. "How about meeting me at the boat landing in a half hour?"

"What for?" Chet questioned him warily.

102 The Secret of Skull Mountain Joe grinned. It was just like Chet not to take any chances where work might be involved!

"We've got to post a lookout for the stuff we dropped in the reservoir," he explained.

"Already?" Chet complained.

"Certainly. There's no telling when the stuff may come through. And somebody's got to be around when it does!"

"Okay," the Morton boy agreed reluctantly. "But I can't make it in a half hour. I'm just starting dinner."

"Skip it," Joe told him, "and I'll ask Aunt Gertrude to pack some food for us. She's just made a batch of jelly doughnuts."

"Jelly doughnuts!" Chet cried. "I'll meet you in fifteen minutes!"

Joe laughed and hung up the phone.

Joe had hoped his father would return before he went to meet Chet. But when he could wait no longer for Mr. Hardy to appear, the boy put the basket of food his aunt had prepared in the car and drove to the boat landing.

He parked the roadster across from the shed where he had seen the motorcycle and went toward it on his way to the landing. He opened the door < Of the building and stepped inside-then stopped short.

The motorcycle was no longer there!

Joe frowned. Sweeper must have returned and Search at Sea
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taken the machine. But if he had, why hadn't Frank returned, too?

Puzzled, Joe went out on the boat landing. The thin man's speedboat was not moored to the landing -and the *Sleuth* was not in her slip.

"Hey!" Chet hailed him. He was sitting on the rail of the dock and he wore a look of deep disgust. "Some fifteen minutes!" he said, looking at his watch.

"Sorry, Chet," Joe apologized.

Chet noted the boy's worried expression. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Joe told him of Frank's absence.

"He's been gone several hours," he said. "I'm afraid something's happened to him."

"Golly," Chet said. "I wish there was something we could do."

Joe gave him the food basket.

"Chet, would you mind going out alone in a skiff to hunt for the things we dropped in the

water?" he asked. "There's a lead I'd like to track down that may explain where Frank is."

"Heck, no," the other boy assured him. "I'll phone Biff Hooper. Maybe he'd like to come."

"Swell," said Joe. He went back toward the shed. "See you later!" he called.

Joe examined the dusty floor of the shed and followed the motorcycle tracks to the street. There the heavy-treaded tires left no imprints.

104 The Secret of Skull Mountain Joe stared at the street thoughtfully. Then he got into the roadster and drove to police headquarters.

Chief Collig looked at him sourly. "Oh, so it's you!" he said.

"What's the matter?" Joe asked.

"Plenty," the heavy, red-faced man told him. "There always is when you Hardy kids poke your noses into other people's business," he added grumpily.

Joe was nettled but did not let it show. He was well aware of Collig's long-standing envy of his and Frank's ability to solve mysteries which had the chief stumped. And he knew Collig would never pass up an opportunity to needle the Hardy boys.

"Mr. Kimball phoned me from Brookside," Collig continued. "He gave me the license number of a motorcycle he wanted returned to him. Said you'd reported seeing the machine in Bayport."

"Then *you* took it away!" Joe exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"You had the machine taken from the shed and sent back to Mr. Kimball."

"What shed?" the policeman roared.

Joe stared at him with surprise. "You mean you *didn't* find the motorcycle?"

"No, blast it!" Chief Collig's heavy jowls shook with anger. "Riley was out all afternoon combing the streets for the

danged contraption! Said there wasn't any such machine with an out-of-state license in Bayport!"

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"It was parked in a shed behind the boat landing," Joe explained. "It couldn't be seen from the street."

"This is a fine time to be telling me!" Collig said, glaring at the boy. "When I told Mr.

Kimball his motorcycle wasn't in Bayport, he practically took my hide off!"

"I wonder who did take the motorcycle?" Joe asked, puzzled.

"I don't know," the red-faced officer told him flatly. "And I wouldn't care if I did. I never want to hear of one of those blasted things again!"

At that moment, a motorcycle went roaring past the police station, and Collig turned purple.

Joe listened intently for an uneven rhythm in the motor, but it moved with smooth precision.

The boy went to the door and stole another look at the police chief as he stepped out.

He was fit to be tied!

Later that night, when Frank did not appear, the Hardys became genuinely worried.

Fenton Hardy arrived home a few minutes after ten o'clock. He had been making the rounds of the railroad station and bus terminals, he told Joe, to ascertain whether Klenger had left town. There was no evidence that he had, unless by car,

and Mr. Hardy felt that the plumber probably was still in Bayport.

Only half listening, because of his concern for his brother, Joe sought the detective's advice.

106 The Secret of Skull Mountain "We'll search the bay," his father decided. "Frank can't have gone very far in the *Sleuth*, unless the boat's fuel tank was full. I'll ask the harbor police to take us out in their launch."

A two-hour search in the coves along the shores of Barmet Bay failed to reveal any sign of the missing boy or of the *Sleuth*.

The police launch headed into deeper water, Every ship in the harbor was signaled,

every flickering light and unusual sound investigated, but still there was no trace of Frank.

"I'm sorry, sir," the police sergeant told Mr. Hardy at last. "I'm afraid we'll have to turn back."

"Let's try just one more place," Joe pleaded. "Merriam Island."

The sergeant looked doubtful.

"If your brother was on the island," he said, "the lighthouse keeper would have radioed the shore."

"Frank might be there without the keeper's knowledge," Joe pointed out. "He might be lying hurt somewhere on the island."

"All right," the sergeant assented, turning the wheel of the launch. "But this will have to be your last stop."

Soon, the wind-swept, wave-lashed mass of rocks that was Merriam Island lay directly ahead of them. The launch swung in as close as it could to a narrow, sandy beach, and Joe jumped into the shallow water and waded ashore.

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"Look!" he cried.

Suddenly exposed by the revolving beam of the lighthouse's powerful navigation light was the white hull of the *Sleuth*! The speedboat lay alongside a tiny dock.

A grizzled, white-haired old man wearing a turtle-neck sweater leaned down over the rail of the tall lighthouse's circular runway. He put a megaphone to his lips.

"Who are ye? What do ye want?" he shouted.

"I'm looking for my brother!" Joe yelled up at him.

The lighthouse keeper shook his head.

"What?" he roared.

Joe made a megaphone of his hands.

"I'm looking for my brother!" he shouted again.

"He's not here!" the keeper yelled back. "There's nobody on this island but me!"

"He must be here!" Joe shouted. "His boat is moored at the dock."

He pointed to the boat, and saw the keeper look in that direction. Then the old man shook his head.

"Not here!" he repeated, and went inside the lighthouse.

Joe turned to find his father standing beside him.

"I don't like this at all," Mr. Hardy said.

"Dad, maybe Frank left the island on another boat," Joe told him. "If he did, he may have left a note!"

108 The Secret of Skull Mountain They went to the *Sleuth* and examined it carefully. In the cockpit they found Frank's shoes and jacket. Then, after a long search, Joe found what they were looking for—a message from Frank. Jammed into the short-wave set was a folded piece of white paper.

While Mr. Hardy held a flashlight, the boy opened the note. They read it silently.

The police sergeant came over to them.

"Are you almost finished here, sir?" he asked the detective.

"Sergeant, my son and I will return to Bayport in the speedboat," Mr. Hardy told him.

"Thanks very much for your assistance. I'll let you know when we find Frank."

The sergeant touched his cap and waded out to the police launch. Joe and his father watched the boat back into deeper water, then swing in a foamy circle toward Bayport.

They read Frank's message again. It said: "Changing to Sweeper's—"

Why hadn't the boy completed the message, they wondered. Was it because he was in a hurry? Or had he been interrupted? And why had he taken off his shoes and jacket?

They looked out at the murky water, as if it held the answer.

CHAPTER XIII

Cast Adrift

As Frank swung the *Sleuth* away from the boat landing in pursuit of Sweeper's speeding craft, he felt a sudden premonition of danger.

He glanced over his shoulder at the boathouse> half tempted to turn back and ask Joe to join him, but his brother had disappeared.

Frank shook off the feeling with a little laugh.

"I must be getting jittery," he told himself sardonically.

He guided the *Sleuth* skillfully across Barmet Bay, skirting ships and smaller craft and holding the boat to as fast a speed as he dared in order to cut down the distance between him and Sweeper.

The thin man's speedboat headed out to sea-and behind it, at a distance calculated not to arouse suspicion, the *Sleuth* followed.

The two boats held this position for a half hour.

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110 The Secret of Skull Mountain Then Frank saw Sweeper's craft curve toward Merriam Island.

He twisted the wheel of the *Sleuth*, and the trim speedboat described a wide, foamy arc as it followed suit.

Directly ahead, the boy saw Barmet lighthouse, a tall, white tower which warned ships away from jagged reefs and shoals. Stretching away from its base was barren, rock-bound Merriam Island.

Sweeper slowed his boat, and cautiously circled the island.

"Wonder what he's going there for?" Frank mused.

He waited until the craft disappeared behind a jutting finger of rocks, then cut the motor of the *Sleuth* and let the boat drift toward a tiny dock extending from a narrow, sandy beach.

Frank leaped out as the speedboat swung alongside the dock, and secured it to the landing. He looked at the lighthouse, but there was no sign of activity in the tower.

"Guess the keeper's asleep," he muttered.

The boy's conjecture was correct. During the day, except in foggy weather, the lighthouse tower itself served as a warning to incoming and outgoing ships. But at night the keeper stood watch, training his eyes on the waters illuminated by the slowly revolving navigation light. The old man's vigil had saved many a ship from the reefs.

Cast Adrift 111

Keeping to the shore, Frank clambered over sharp rocks and ran along short stretches of narrow beach to the spot where he had seen Sweeper's boat disappear.

Soon he came to a cove and saw the craft rocking gently a short distance from land.

Sweeper was pacing the beach, smoking a cigarette and staring frequently out to sea.

"He must be waiting for someone," Frank told himself.

He stretchea out on a boulder, washed smooth by the sea, and watched the man. A low shelf of rocks in front of the boulder prevented him from being seen.

Minutes ticked by. Then an hour. Frank saw that Sweeper was becoming impatient, then angry. He paced the sand with short, jerky steps, stopping from time to time to glare at the sea.

Finally, he squared his shoulders, flicked a cigarette into the water, then rolled up his trousers and waded quickly toward the boat.

At that instant, the sound of a launch came clearly over the water.

Sweeper stopped and shaded his eyes with his hand. Frank also looked. The boat was heading directly toward the beach.

"This is it!" the boy thought excitedly.

But instead of putting in to the cove, the launch stopped well beyond the surf. The man at the

112 The Secret of Skull Mountain wheel fumbled with something in his hands, then tossed a tin can into the water.

He waved to Sweeper, pointed at the can and swung the launch back toward Bayport!

"Now what?" Frank asked himself, puzzled.

He saw the can dancing on the waves. Then the surf caught it, and a white lip of foam hurled it toward the beach.

Sweeper waded into the foaming surf and plucked the can out of the water. He pried open the lid and took out a slip of paper.

Slowly, he read the note. Then, disgusted, he crunched the paper into a ball and threw it into the surf.

The thin man waded to the speedboat and cast off. A few seconds later, the craft eased out of the cove and roared through the waves toward Bayport.

Frank rose from behind the sheltering rocks and ran to the sandy beach. He waded into the surf and snatched the soggy ball from the churning water. Returning to the beach, he unfolded the water-soaked paper carefully. The message was typewritten, and the water had smudged the ink, but the words were still legible. They read: "Meeting postponed until nine o'clock tonight. Will meet you at buoy off Barmet light."

The message was unsigned.

Frank looked across the water. A hundred yards offshore was a buoy, its bell tinkling faintly.

Cast Adrift *11\$*

"That must be the buoy the note mentions," he mused.

He looked at his watch. There was still plenty of time to return to Bayport and later be on hand for the meeting.

Whistling, Frank walked along the shore toward the *Sleuth*.

"This is going to be interesting," he assured himself. He wondered who had sent Sweeper the message. "Golly!" he thought. "Maybe it's from Dr. Foster himself!"

He cast off the mooring line of the *Sleuth* and, climbing into the cockpit, pressed the starter button. The motor caught with a roar, and the sleek, white craft backed away from the dock and started leisurely after the other fast-disappearing speedboat.

However, the *Sleuth* had not gone far when the motor began to sputter. Frank looked quickly at the gas gauge. The gas tank was almost empty!

The youth turned the wheel of the boat and headed back toward the island. He was none too soon. The motor sputtered and coughed violently, then lapsed into silence as the *Sleuth* again swung alongside the dock.

Frank debated going to the lighthouse and waking the keeper but decided against it. It might interfere with his plan for attending the meeting.

He considered sending Joe and Mr. Hardy a message on the speedboat's short-wave set but decided 114 The Secret of Skull Mountain against that also. They'd worry about his absence, he reflected. But if he told them of his plan, Joe or his father might insist on joining him-and more than one Hardy eavesdropping on the meeting might betray them.

Frank looked across the water at the buoy. From the dock, it was about a hundred and fifty yards away-but the boy was confident he could swim the distance when the time came.

He sat down in the cockpit and glanced at his watch. It was going to be a long wait.

Hours later, streaks of red flamed across the sky as the sun seemed to sink into the sea. Then dusk fell, and soon night cloaked the island in darkness.

At first, Frank did not hear the sound. The tedious waiting had made him hungry, then sleepy. He dozed peacefully, his head on his chest.

It sounded again-the unmistakable hum of a motor.

Frank's head snapped up. He squinted his eyes and stared in the direction of the sound, but he could see nothing in the darkness except the rolling sea.

He found the binoculars which were kept in a compartment of the boat and trained them on the water. Through the powerful lens, he saw the tiny green and red running lights of an approaching but still distant speedboat.

Frank studied his watch. The time was twenty minutes to nine.

Cast Adrift 115

"Wow!" he said. "I'll have to hurry!"

He took out paper and pencil and addressed a note to Joe and his father. He wanted to tell them that he was going to try to conceal himself in Sweeper's boat and overhear what was said at the meeting.

"Changing to Sweeper's-" Frank wrote hastily.

And at that moment, the pencil point broke.

Frank gave it a look of disgust. He searched the boat unsuccessfully for another pencil or a pen, then tried to find a knife to sharpen a new pencil point.

Finally, he gave up and jammed the partly writ-5 ten message into the short-wave set.

He focused the binoculars again. The speedboat was much closer.

Removing his jacket and shoes, Frank stepped to the deck of the *Sleuth*. Then he dived cleanly into the water and struck out for the buoy.

The surf was even rougher than he had anticipated, and he gasped as the waves broke over his head. Settling into a slow crawl, he swam steadily toward the blinking light which marked the buoy.

The boy could see the speedboat clearly now, and he felt a tingle of surprise and relief as his eyes fell on a tender towed behind the craft. It was going to be easier for him to conceal himself than he had thought!

Minutes passed, and the churning waters began to sap Frank's strength. He heard the bell of the buoy tinkling a short distance ahead, and dug into the waves with renewed vigor.

i 16 The Secret of Skull Mountain At last he reached the buoy, and clung to an iron chain which dipped deep into the water. The floating marker danced with the waves and flung spray into the boy's face.

Moments later, the speedboat swung past the buoy and came to a stop. It lay idly on the water, the tender behind it, and Frank saw Sweeper step to the deck and stare into the darkness.

The boy knew the buoy kept him from being seen, and, watching his chance, he swam quietly to the tender.

Soon, the launch Frank and Sweeper had seen earlier approached the buoy. Frank drew himself stealthily into the tender as the thin man's attention was fixed on the launch. He stretched out on the bottom of the boat and pulled a tarpaulin over him.

He heard the sound of scraping wood as the launch came alongside the speedboat.

Lifting a corner of the tarpaulin, Frank peered at the strange craft.

Two men emerged from the cabin and stepped into the speedboat. One was a stranger to the boy. The other was Klenger!

Frank whistled under his breath. The surly, redheaded plumber hadn't left Bayport after all!

The two men sat down with Sweeper in the cockpit of the speedboat, and the three began to talk earnestly. Frank listened intently, but the sound of the waves washing against the boats and *the* tinkle of the buov bell drowned out their words.

Cast Adrift 117

"Got to do better than this!" he told himself determinedly.

He inched toward the bow of the tender and, hoisting himself cautiously, felt for the painter. His fingers closed on it, and imperceptibly he pulled the tender closer to the speedboat.

Frank could hear the voices distinctly now, and he slid noiselessly under the tarpaulin.

The stranger was speaking.

"Alibis! "he sneered. "That's all I hear! I want action!"

"You'll get action," Klenger promised. "Just give us a little more time."

"Time for what?" the first man snapped. "For those engineers to fill the valley with water and ruin our plans!"

"Stop worrying about Carpenter and Ames," Sweeper advised him. "They haven't interfered with the work so far-and they're not going to!"

"I'm not as confident of that as you are, Sweeper," Frank heard the stranger say sharply.

"I hear Carpenter's even got a couple of kids snooping around the mountain!"

Frank grinned.

"I'll take care of the kids, too," Sweeper assured him.

"See that you do!" said the first man. "Klenger, I'll give you twenty-four hours more! If Foster hasn't completed his tests by that time, I'll-"

118 The Secret of Skull Mountain He broke off as a rattle of tin came from the tender.

"What's that?"

Frank kicked himself mentally. His foot had knocked over an oilcan, and it rattled from one side of the boat to the other with every wash of the waves!

"Sounds like a tin can," Klenger remarked.

"I'll get rid of it," Sweeper said. "We can't talk with that racket going on."

Frantically, Frank felt with his foot and pressed it against the oilcan. The rattle stopped.

"Never mind, Sweeper," the stranger told him. "It's all right now."

Frank breathed with relief. But it was shortlived.

"I'm not so sure," he heard the thin man say softly. He seemed to be standing right over the boy. "I didn't pull this tender right up to the boat. And I didn't spread canvas all over the bottom of it!"

He yanked off the tarpaulin.

"Okay, kid," he ordered. "Get up!"

Frank stood up, and Sweeper turned to the Stranger.

"This is one of the snoopers you were talking about," he informed him.

The stranger stared at the youth, and Klenger's mouth set in a hard line.

"I know the kid," he said harshly. "He's too Cast Adrift US1 smart for his own good. I'll take care of him right now."

The stranger's hand shot out and pulled Klenger back.

"No rough stuff," he ordered. "The kid's father is a detective. You've put me into a big enough jam already."

For a moment, Klenger's hard eyes stayed fixed on Frank. His fists were clenched.

"Let's cut the kid adrift," Sweeper suggested. He pointed to the water. "The tide's heading out to sea. By the time somebody picks him up, we ought to be through with the job!"

Frank stared at the water, and his heart sank. While the man had been talking, the boats had drifted farther out into the ocean-and Merriam Island was far too distant now for him to swim to it.

"That's the ticket," the stranger said. "Cut him loose, Sweeper!"

The thin man made sure there were no oars in the tender, then stepped back onto the speedboat. He unhooked the painter, and the tender drifted rapidly away.

"So long, kid!" he called mockingly. "Take care of yourself!"

Frank sat down in the tender and watched helplessly as the tide carried the boat slowly but steadily out to sea. He scanned the water for a sign of a ship, but there was none in sight.

The Secret of Skull Mountain He rolled up the tarpaulin and went over the boat carefully, hoping there would be something he could use for oars or a rudder. But he might as well have spared himself the effort.

Dejectedly, he sat down.

"You've put yourself in a fine fix," he told himself bitterly. "No oars, no food, no water to drink-and if I know anything about wind, a storm's coming up!"

It was true. Black clouds were billowing up in the sky, and the waves rose as the wind lashed the water.

Frank studied the water anxiously. Then, as his eyes fell upon the empty oarlocks, a plan formed in his mind.

He unrolled the tarpaulin, then twisted and squeezed a corner of the canvas into a short length of rope which he thrust through one of the locks. He tied the rope length into a tight knot, tugging it hard against the oarlock to make sure it could not slip through.

The youth went through the same procedure with the opposite corner of the canvas, knotting it outside the second oarlock. Then he stood on a seat of the boat, holding aloft the remaining two corners of the tarpaulin-and stretched his arms wide. The impact of the wind against the outstretched canvas almost knocked Frank overboard, but he gritted his lips and set his feet firmly.

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"Sweeper didn't count on my rigging up a sail!" he said to himself, grinning despite the tremendous strain on his arms

and the spray which was flung in his face.

Aided by the improvised sail, the boat plunged through the waves toward the island.

Suddenly a streak of lightning snaked across the sky. There was a clap of thunder, and rain fell in torrents.

The waves, lashed to fury by the storm, leaped higher. Several times Frank almost lost his balance. But the boy was determined to return to the island.

Then it happened. A gust of wind tore one corner of the canvas from his hands. Frank reached quickly for the violently flapping tarpaulin, and lost his footing.

A huge wave sent the boat reeling and flung the youth forward. Frank grabbed frantically at the seat, missed-and plunged into the sea!

He struggled to the surface and shook the water from his eyes. The boat was fifteen feet away, and as he watched, the wind whipped it on.

He was alone in the stormy sea.

CHAPTER XIV

Chet Morton, Detective

desperately, Frank's eyes searched for the island. A wave lifted him, and he stared through the darkness seeking vainly for the shore. Suddenly he was conscious of the tinkling of a bell.

The buoy!

He turned his head and saw the light a few feet from him, bobbing and blinking as the buoy rolled with the waves.

With a thankful heart, he swam toward it and clung to the chain. He knew now that the island was only a hundred yards away, but his efforts with the canvas and his plunge into the sea had nearly exhausted him. He closed his eyes and waited for the storm to abate.

It was morning when the sky cleared and the waves subsided. The narrow, sandy beach of Merriam Island seemed to Frank to beckon invitingly, and he attempted to strike out for the shore. But his arms, Chet Morton, Detective
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numb from clinging to the buoy, were too heavy to lift.

Suddenly a helicopter appeared out of a cloud, and Frank's heart quickened with hope.

The clumsy-looking machine's four-bladed propeller sparkled in the sun as the plane dipped toward the sea.

Frank shouted and waved his arm weakly. He saw an arm extend itself through the plane's window and wave back, and a few minutes later the helicopter hovered directly over him and started to descend.

The plane halted thirty feet above the water, and hung in the air. The cabin door was thrust open and a blond-haired youth looked down.

"Frank!" he called anxiously. "Can you hold out a moment longer?"

It was Joe!

Frank grinned happily. He had never been so glad to see anyone in his life!

"I'm all right, Joe!" he assured his brother. "Just get me out of this soup!"

Joe laughed with relief. "Okay!" he called. "Catch!"

He dropped a nylon rescue line toward the boy. It was equipped with a breeches buoy, which splashed a few yards away from Frank.

Frank swam to the buoy and thrust his legs through the trouserlike bottom.

The pilot of the helicopter held the plane's position as Joe turned a windlass and drew the rescue line taut. Then the younger Hardy boy hoisted his brother into the plane.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" he exclaimed, helping Frank to a seat and throwing his own jacket over his brother's shoulders.

Frank grinned at him. "That goes double!" he said, his teeth chattering.

Skip, the pilot, shook the youth's hand warmly and headed the helicopter toward Bayport. He knew the Hardy family well.

Joe wisely refrained from asking questions until the boys had arrived home. Then, fortified with one of Aunt Gertrude's meals, Frank described in detail what had happened.

Aunt Gertrude's eyes popped.

"My goodness!" she declared. "It's a wonder you didn't drown!"

"You must be exhausted, son," his mother said worriedly. "I think you should get right into bed."

Mr. Hardy promptly supported his wife's suggestion.

"I *am* pretty tired," Frank confessed. "Maybe forty winks-or even twenty-would make a new man out of me."

Joe accompanied Frank to his room.

"I haven't been exactly idle, myself," he bragged with a grin.

He told Frank of his trip to Brookside-and his Chet Morton, Detective 125

conviction that Sweeper was Timothy Kimball, Jr.

"I always thought Sweeper was a phony name," Frank yawned, as he stretched luxuriously between clean sheets.

"Or a nickname," Joe added.

But his brother did not hear him. He was well on his way toward sleep. Joe tiptoed from the room and found his father waiting for him in the study.

"What Frank overheard last night, together with the facts we already knew about Klenger and Sweeper, is enough evidence for us to clinch the case," Mr. Hardy told the boy quietly. "But our first concern is Dr. Foster. If we force their hands now, we may never find out what happened to him."

Joe nodded.

"Our best bet," the detective went on, "is to try to locate, then follow, the three men. One of them is likely to lead us to Dr. Foster."

"What do you want me to do, Dad?" Joe asked eagerly.

Fenton Hardy paced the room thoughtfully for a moment.

"I want you to go to Klenger's house, son," he said at last. "Try to find out whether he returned there last night. If he didn't, try to learn when he will be home."

"Right," Joe said, putting his hand on the doorknob.

"Hold on a minute, Joe," his father said hastily.

The Secret of Skull Mountain He took a paper from his desk and glanced at it, "I've checked Klenger's fingerprints-he left his prints on the letterhead he gave Frank-with the FBI. He has a record-so don't take any unnecessary chances."

"I understand," Joe told him, smiling.

Mr. Hardy rubbed his chin.

"Klenger's plumbing shop is closed," he stated, "But Klenger and the other men may be using it as a meeting place. Do you suppose Chet could stand watch on it? The crooks would be less apt to notice a boy than a man."

"Chet!" Joe's first impulse was to laugh, then he reflected that this attitude was unfair to Chet. "I think so, Dad," he said. "He can keep undercover."

"Good!" The tall detective put on his hat. "I'm going to Brookside to check on young Kimball, the man we've known as Sweeper. There's little doubt now that you were right about his real identity."

Joe phoned Chet as his father went out the door. Young Morton was both flabbergasted and flattered by Fenton Hardy's suggestion.

"Me? A detective?" he exclaimed.

"Sure!" Joe said, grinning at his friend's excitement. "That is, if you want the job."

"Want it!" Chet exploded. "I'll watch that plumbing shop closer than a bug in a rug!"

Chet suddenly clapped his hand to his head.

"Hh-oh!" he said.

Chet Morton, Detective 127

- 'What's the matter?' asked Joe.

"I promised to meet Biff at the boat landing this morning. We planned to take a skiff out in the bay and look for that stuff you and Frank and I planted in the reservoir. Biff couldn't make it yesterday."

Joe debated for a moment.

"You'd better do it," he decided. "The stuff may have come through last night-but we couldn't have spotted it in the storm, anyway. You and Biff set up a watch," he concluded, "while I investigate Klenger's house. Then I'll take over while you train your eagle eye on the plumbing shop."

"Check," the other agreed. "Have you heard from Frank?" he asked.

"He's home," Joe informed his friend. "Tell you all about it later."

And the boys hung up.

The window shades were still drawn in Klenger's house when Joe drove up. He stared at the upstairs window where he had seen the woman's face, but the face did not reappear.

Joe mounted the steps to the porch and rang the doorbell.

To his surprise, the door was opened at once, and a middle-aged woman wearing a soiled dressing gown stood in the doorway.

It was the woman whose face he had seen in the window.

"What d'ya want?" she asked abruptly.

128 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Is your husband home?" Joe asked.

"Klenger? No." She regarded him suspiciously. "What d'ya want him for?"

"Our kitchen faucet is leaking," Joe told her. "Mr. Klenger promised to fix it for us."

The woman's mouth broke into a smirk. "It'll be a puddle if you wait for Klenger to take care of it," she said. "He's gone on a trip."

"Oh," said Joe, acting as if he knew something about it. "Did he go there by boat?"

"By boat?" the woman said, puzzled, caught oft guard. "You don't go to the hills by-"

She shut her mouth tightly and stared hostilely at the boy, then slammed the door in his face!

Joe grinned as he ran down the steps. If Klenger was in the hills, that meant Skull Mountain, and it was likely that Dr. Foster was with him!

He drove the roadster to the boat landing. Then, breaking the *Sleuth* out of her slip, Joe headed the speedboat out into the bay. A short distance from the shore, he recognized Chet sitting in a skiff. With him was Biff Hooper, another high school friend of the Hardy boys.

"Hi!" Joe called.

Chet waved to him, and Joe brought the *Sleuth* alongside the boys' skiff.

"See anything yet?" Joe asked eagerly, as Biff caught hold of the speedboat's gunwale.

Chet shook his head gloomily. "Maybe the stuff got stuck in a branch of the tunnel," he said.

Chet Morton, Detective 129

"It might," Joe admitted. "But we planted enough articles for at least one to turn up in the bay."

Chet sighed. "How'd you make out at Klenger's house?" he asked.

Joe told him.

"Boy, you sure have a way with the women!" Chet kidded him.

Joe made a pass at him as Biff laughed.

"Want me to go out in the *Sleuth* with you?" Biff asked.

"I wish you would, Biff," Joe told him frankly. "It must be pretty monotonous all alone. And two pairs of eyes are better than one."

"It's okay with me," Biff said. "I've fished for everything else in these waters. I may as well try my luck at catching a decoy duck!"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't find a decoy very appetizing!" Joe laughed.

Joe ran Chet back to the boat landing in the *Sleuth*, towing the skiff behind. They tied the skiff to the landing, and Chet

stepped onto the dock.

"Guess it's time for me to go and watch Klenger's shop," he announced importantly.

"Make sure you don't lose it," Joe ribbed him.

The Hardy boy, with Biff sitting in the cockpit beside him, again headed the speedboat out into the bay and started back toward the cove where the skiff had been. Chet watched the speeding craft as it bounded over the water, then started for Main Street 130 The Secret 01 Skull Mountain where he was to take up his job of watching the plumbing shop.

As Joe had told him, the shop was closed. But Chet peered through the plate-glass window, hoping to detect a sign of activity inside.

Finding nothing that aroused his suspicion, he looked for a place where he could screen himself and still watch the store.

Directly across the street was a hot-dog and orange-juice stand. Chet brightened. No one, he reasoned, would suspect him of spying if he was stationed there.

He went across the street, and after exchanging a few pleasantries with the proprietor, he bit happily into a hot dog, washing the frankfurter down with a tall, cool glass of orange juice.

"This is the life!" he told himself complacently.

Chet envisioned himself as a man of Mr. Hardy's age, or maybe a few years younger.

He, too, was an internationally famous detective-a private eye whose daring deeds were known and respected the whole world over. People clamored for his services, but Chet disdained all cases except those that were a real challenge to his courage and ingenuity.

Chet sighed happily. Then the horn of a passing car brought him back to reality.

Ten hot dogs and twelve glasses of orange juice later, Chet was ready to give up the idea of being a detective.

Nothing exciting had happened at the shop across Chet Morton, Detective 131

the street, and the monotony of watching-together with a slight stomach-ache-made the would-be detective wish he had stayed in the skiff.

Chet consulted his notebook. Several people had called at the plumbing shop, rattling the door and knocking on the window when they discovered the store was closed.

He had dutifully written down a description of the callers and the license numbers of the cars in which some of them came. But nothing about them struck Chet as suspicious.

He closed the notebook and looked at his watch. He had been spying on the shop for three hours.

"Golly," he complained. "How much longer am I supposed to stay on this job?"

It occurred to him that neither Mr. Hardy nor Joe had set a time for him to quit, and he

perked up.

"Guess I'll have one more hot dog," he decided, "and then break off."

The proprietor looked at Chet as he put the money on the counter.

"What, agjiin?" he said.

He shook his head wonderingly and rang up the sale on the cash register.

Chet bit off a huge piece of the frankfurter, then turned to face the store again. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

A man was unlocking the door of the plumbing shop! He glanced furtively up and down the street^ then disappeared inside]

CHAPTER XV

The Dancing Duck

Chet stared at the shop with mounting excitement, and wondered what he ought to do.

He tried to imagine what Frank and Joe would do if they were in his place, but failed.

Putting down the hot dog, Chet walked nervously across the street to the shop. He peered cautiously through the window, but the man seemed to have disappeared into a rear room of the store.

Chet wet his lips, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He tried the door and found with relief that it was locked.

Desperately he looked up and down the street and then sighed in relief. Coming toward him, swinging his night stick as if he didn't have a care in «he world, was Patrolman Con Riley!

Chet beckoned to him excitedly. The policeman stared at the boy placidly, then eyed him with

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suspicion as Chet dragged him into the doorway of the adjoining store.

"What've you been up to?" Riley demanded.

Chet explained the situation as rapidly as he could. At mention of the Hardys, the patrolman grew sullen. Only recently he had been made to look a fool by one of the boys'

clever deductions, and he still smarted from the experience. But Fen-ton Hardy's interest in the shop made him pause. He did not wish to be accused of not cooperating with the detective.

Riley pushed back his cap and scratched his head.

"We'll just have to wait till the bird comes out," he decided.

After a few minutes, the man Chet had seen reappeared. He was small and furtive-looking, and he walked with a limp. Under his arm he carried a ledger.

Glancing hurriedly up and down the street, the man locked the door of the plumbing shop.

"Let me handle this," Riley said importantly.

He stepped out of the adjoining doorway, swinging his club.

"Here, you," he said officiously. "What were you doing in that store?"

A look of fright came into the man's eyes, and he shrank back.

"No, you don't!" Riley cried, catching hold of *his* coat. "You got some explaining to do!"

134 The Secret of Skull Mountain Riley fixed the man with a stern look, conscious of the crowd that was rapidly assembling.

"Now, then," he said. "What's your business?"

"I-I'm a friend of Mr. Klenger's," the man stammered. "He sent me to the store on an errand."

"A likely story!" the policeman sneered. "You'll have to do better than that, my friend-or I'll run you in!"

"It's true!" the man cried.

"Ask him for identification," Chet suggested.

Riley glared at the boy.

"Let's see your wallet," he told the man shortly.

The man reached for his wallet and took out a business card. He extended it to the patrolman with shaking fingers.

"You can see for yourself," he declared. "I'm a bookkeeper. Mr. Klenger gave me the keys to his shop so I could go over his accounts."

Riley read the printing on the card as Chet looked at it over his shoulder. It said: charles martin Certified Public Accountant "Maybe it's not his card," Chet said brightly. "Maybe he got it from somebody else!"

The stout, red-faced patrolman glared at him again.

"I'm handling this!" he declared pompously. He The Dancing Duck 135

turned back to the small, frightened-looking man. "Gimme that ledger," he ordered.

The man surrendered it reluctantly. Riley opened the account book and turned the pages. At that moment, a tall,

thin man wormed his way through the crowd.

"Pardon me," he said to the small man, with a significant look. He bumped into Riley and knocked the ledger from the policeman's hands. "Oops-sorry!"

Riley fumed as the stranger pushed past him.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" he shouted.

"Look out!" Chet yelled. "He's getting away!"

The patrolman stared at him. "Who?" he asked.

"The-the bookkeeper!" Chet said, hopping up and down in his excitement.

Riley's jaw dropped. The small man was dodging through the crowd, the ledger clutched under his arm!

"Stop!" the patrolman roared, trying to run after him. "Stop that man!"

A motorcycle stood at the corner of the street just ahead of the two fleeing men. The thin stranger jumped into the driver's seat and the bookkeeper scrambled up behind, then the motorcycle roared away.

Chet's eyes popped as the machine's motor misfired, then leveled off into a peculiar, uneven

136 The Secret of Skull Mountain rhythm. It was the machine Frank and Joe had told him about.

"Hey!" he cried. "That's the motorcycle Mr. Kimball reported missing!"

Riley flung his cap on the pavement, put his hands on his hips and glared at the youth.

"You got me into this!" he shouted, working himself into a rage. "First, you make me lose a prisoner, then you tell me about the motorcycle when it's too late!" He brandished his club threateningly at Chet. "If I ever catch you around this shop again, ni_ni_"

What horrible fate awaited him at the policeman's hands, Chet never knew. He was too busy running down the street.

At the Hardys' house, Chet found Mr. Hardy and Frank deep in conversation.

"Hi!" he greeted Frank. "What happened to you?"

Frank told him, and Chet stared disbelievingly.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "And I thought *my* experience was exciting!"

"What was it?" Mr. Hardy asked.

Chet described his adventure with Patrolman Riley. Chet took it seriously and dreaded meeting the policeman again, but Frank laughed-and even Mr. Hardy could not help smiling.

Then the detective said, "That explains why Sweeper wasn't in his father's office when I went to see Mr. Kimball this morning."

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Seeing the question in the boys' eyes, lie related the story of his visit to Brookside.

The thin man was definitely Timothy Kimball, Jr., he told them. Sweeper was a

nickname that had been given to young Kimball when he was captain of his college crew.

"Mr. Kimball is extremely upset about his son," Mr. Hardy concluded. "Up to now, he's done everything he could to shield Sweeper and cover up for him. But he agrees that his son is too deeply involved in Dr. Foster's disappearance to be protected in the future. I think we can count on Mr. Kimball to give us any information he learns about the gang," he added.

"What about the man with the limp?" Cllet asked.

Mr. Hardy shrugged. "Obviously he's a confederate," he stated. "We'll check on him later."

He looked at Chet meaningly.

"I've a hunch the plumbing shop is being used for the gang's purpose," he said. "It may pay us to post a regular watch on it."

Chet turned pale.

"You mean me?" he stammered weakly.

"Why not?" the detective queried. "You did a good job today. It wasn't your fault the men got away."

Chet beamed at the unexpected praise.

"You just leave it to me, Mr. Hardy," he said importantly. "I'll keep an eye on everything; that goes on at the shop!"

138 The Secret of Skull Mountain Frank hid a smile. "Guess I'll go down to the bay," he announced. "Joe and Biff may have picked up the stuff we planted in the reservoir. Coming, Chet?" he added.

"You bet," said Chet.

It was growing dark when the two boys arrived at the boat landing. The *Sleuth* was not in her slip. They scanned the bay, but Joe and Biff were not in sight.

"Come on," Frank said. "We'll look for them in a rowboat."

Chet's face fell at the thought that he might be called upon to row, but Frank seized the oars of the borrowed boat, and Chet stepped into the skiff cheerfully.

Frank rowed the skiff slowly along the shore, the boys' eyes alert for floating objects that might prove to be the articles they had tossed into the reservoir.

Beyond a rocky point, they saw the *Sleuth* anchored offshore, Joe and Biff sitting in the cockpit.

Frank rowed the skiff alongside, and the boys greeted one another.

"Any luck?" Frank asked his brother.

"Not yet," Joe replied. "I'm afraid the stuff came through during the storm last night and was washed out to sea."

"I hope not," Frank said, frowning. "We'd have to make the test all over again."

The Hardy boys swapped places, Frank taking 'J' The Dancing Duck 139

over the wheel of the *Sleuth* with Biff in the cockpit beside him, Joe joining Chet in the skiff. Then they hooked a towline from the speedboat to the skiff, and starting the *Sleuth's* motor, Frank guided the two boats as close to the rocky shore as he dared.

The speedboat poked cautiously into the numerous coves which bit into the shore line of the bay, the skiff trailing close behind. Hours later, there was still no sign of what they were looking for.

"Let's go back," Chet pleaded. "I'm starved!"

"We'll try one more cove," Frank said. "If there's no sign of the junk, we'll go home."

He steered the *Sleuth* toward a rocky slit in the shore, then cut the motor. The two boats drifted into the cove with the tide.

Frank trained the speedboat's headlight on the steep shore, which was covered with boulders and clumps of bayberry. He swept the light slowly along the water line, the other youths trailing the beam with their flashlights.

The lights made a complete sweep around the cove, but the boys could see no evidence of any opening in the rocks, any stream, or any objects in the water.

Discouraged, Frank snapped off the headlight and swung the *Sleuth* slowly back toward the mouth of the inlet.

Watching from the skiff, which followed in the wake of the speedboat, Joe suddenly thought he saw

Skull Mountain a small white object bump against the *Sleuth* and veer away.

"Hold it!" he yelled.

Frank quickly cut the *Sleuth's* motor.

Joe leaned over the bow of the skiff and shot the beam of his flashlight down at the water.

Bobbing and dancing in the waves stirred up by the speedboat was a white decoy duck-with the initials *F* and *J* painted on its sides in red!

CHAPTER XVI

The Vanishing Sailor

trank-it's the duck!"

"Looks as though there must be a tunnel after all, Joel"

The Hardy boys grinned across at each other, and in a moment all four youths-Frank, Joe, Chet and Biff-were shouting and thumping one another joyously.

Then they examined the decoy. It evidently had been knocked about quite a bit, for the paint was much the worse for wear. Greatly encouraged, the boys took their places in the two boats and circled the cove once more.

They searched every inch of its surface for the yellow pine and the barrel stave, but they found nothing more.

"They must have floated into a branch of the tunnel and got stuck," Joe said.

"Either that or they were washed out to sea," said 141

142 The Secret of Skull Mountain Frank, looking out into the darkness of the bay0

Biff peered over the side of the speedboat.

"Must be a current down below," he observed. "Look how roily the water is here."

"Guess it's the fresh water flowing in from the reservoir-and stirring up the sand and mud particles on the bottom of the cove," Frank told him.

"Golly, I'd like to dive down there and see what's going on!" Joe exclaimed.

Frank laughed. "There'll be time enough for that tomorrow when it's daylight!" he assured his brother.

He pressed the *Sleuth's* starter button, and the motor throbbed. Before he eased the two boats carefully out of the cove, Frank took a piece of white chalk from his pocket and inscribed a large X on a rock, well above the high-tide mark.

"That's so we won't have to hunt all over the bay for the right inlet to the cove," he explained with a grin. He gestured for Joe and Chet to join him and Biff in the speedboat, and they clambered into the cockpit.

Then, with a roar of its motor, the speedboat headed for home, the empty skiff bouncing in the *Sleuth's* wake like an aquaplane.

Early the next day, Frank and Joe returned to the cove. Chet had resumed his watch on the plumbing shop, and Biff had business of his own.

As the boys prepared to dive into the water where they had found the duck floating the night before, they saw an object whirling toward the surface.

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It was the red-and-white striped barrel stave!

Joe leaned over the gunwale of the anchored *Sleuth* and seized the piece of wood which had just emerged from its long journey underground.

"Guess that clinches it!" Frank told Joe. "If the outlet isn't down there, I'll eat mud!"

Donning their swimming shorts, the boys dived overboard together, and swam down

toward the bottom of the cove.

The bottom was rock, covered with mud. But in the spot where the boys had dived, the mud particles were churning as if a tremendous force were pushing them up from the floor of the bay!

Frank pointed, and the boys swam closer to the churning mud.

A strong current, flowing from the bay floor, carried them upward. Both swimmers realized that they were being borne to the surface by a stream of fresh water, which was being forced through a tunnel and up through the sea by the pressure of a reservoir twenty miles away! The boys hoisted themselves into the boat, breathing heavily from their exertions. Then they put on their clothes and headed the *Sleuth* for home. Each knew the other was eager to return to Skull Mountain and tell Bob and Dick about their discovery.

As the boys were crossing the boat landing on their way to the car, Frank suddenly clutched Joe by the arm.

"Do you see what I see?" he whispered, pulling 144 The Secret of Skull Mountain his brother down with him behind an empty barrel

Walking along the dock was Sailor Hawkins!

The old seadog's back was toward the boys, but his short, squat figure and rolling gait were immediately familiar.

"What do you suppose he's doing in Bayport?" asked Joe.

Frank shook his head. "One of us had better follow him," he said. "He may be on some business for Sweeper."

"I'll do it," Joe told him. "You drive the car home and pick up the stuff we'll need for the camp. I'll phone you later and tell you where to meet me."

Frank went on toward the roadster, and Joe trailed Sailor Hawkins.

The old mariner seemed to be in no hurry, stopping to look curiously, but with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm, at the motor launches anchored offshore.

He walked on toward the warehouses, where crates of supplies and machine equipment were being hoisted aboard waiting freighters bound for European and Asiatic ports.

Joe followed, trying to appear casual. He kept his eyes on the sailor, at the same time sidestepping the shouting, sweating longshoremen who were trundling barrels and crates onto the dock.

Hawkins seemed to have his eye on a schooner anchored off one of the piers. He stared at the tall The Vanishing Sailor
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masts as the vessel rolled gently with the waves.

"Bet he's wishing he could sail on her," Joe told himself with a grin.

The arm of a boom swung out from a freighter over the loading platform and hooked a rope net laden with heavy

boxes. The cable drew taut and the net was hauled swiftly into the air.

"Look out!" a longshoreman yelled.

Joe's head snapped up at the warning. One of the rope strands had broken, and the hook had torn loose from the net. The heavy cargo was hurtling directly at his head!

Joe flung himself to one side and the boxes crashed to the dock-not six feet away!

There was a surge of excited voices as men looked down at him from the rail of the freighter and ran toward him along the wharf.

A longshoreman helped the youth to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Joe shook his head and brushed the dirt from his clothes. He looked at the spot where he had last seen Hawkins, but the sailor had disappeared.

Shaking off the solicitous dock hands, Joe made his way toward the row of supply

houses, cheap restaurants and secondhand stores which lined the street opposite the wharf.

He looked through the windows of the stores, his eyes traveling swiftly over the occupants. Sailoi Hawkins was not among them.

146 The Secret of Skull Mountain Dejected, the boy entered a dingy drugstore and made his way toward the phone booths.

"Might as well call Frank and start for the camp," he decided gloomily.

The end booth was unoccupied, and Joe slid into it and closed the door. He was about to deposit a coin in the phone's slot when through the thin partition he heard a man speaking in the adjoining booth.

There was no mistaking the salty, nautical phrases. It was Sailor Hawkins!

Joe pressed his ear to the partition.

"Aye, matey," the seaman was saying, "I'll be waiting for ye at the warehouse. An' don't be late, ye blighter, or I'll keelhaul ye!"

He hung up and left the booth. Joe waited for a moment, then slipped out and followed him. This time he didn't mean to let Hawkins get away!

The old sailor went on down the street to the loading platform of a rambling warehouse.

A large, weather-beaten sign on the building read: JAMES HENNESSEY, INC. *Shipments Overseas to All Parts of the World* Joe studied it carefully, but the name meant nothing to him. He saw Hawkins enter the building, and he quickly but cautiously followed him.

The warehouse was stacked with crates, but there The
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were no longshoremen in sight. Hawkins sat down and lit an old corncob pipe.

Slipping behind a large crate, Joe waited. A short time later, he heard curiously uneven footsteps approaching along the warehouse floor. From his hiding place, Joe could make out a small, furtive-looking man entering the warehouse—a man who walked with a limp!

Joe tingled with sudden excitement. During the search for the underground outlet, Chet had told of having seen a man with Sweeper whose description tallied with this stranger's.

"It looks as though Hawkins and Limpy are mixed up with Klenger, too," he said to himself.

The limping man went straight up to the sailor and they exchanged a few words. Then the small man took some bills from his wallet, counted them carefully and gave the money to Hawkins.

At that moment, a dock worker came trundling a hand truck through the warehouse door. He stared curiously at the two men, then pushed the truck toward the crate which concealed Joe.

"Oh, no!" Joe groaned. "Not this one!"

But straight for Joe's crate came the hand truck. The laborer tilted the crate and slid the shoe of the truck under it.

Joe glanced helplessly at the nearest place of concealment. It was the stack of crates beside which Hawkins and the limping stranger were standing 148 The Secret of Skull Mountain An instant later, the longshoreman saw the boy.

"Hey!" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

Hawkins and the stranger turned swiftly.

"So it's you!" the old sailor roared, taking a threatening step toward Joe. "You blasted little spy!"

The limping man grabbed his arm. "No, Hawkins!" he cried.

He whispered something rapidly in the seaman's ear. Then the two men separated-Hawkins running out the front door of the warehouse, while the man with the limp made for the rear exit.

Joe ran after Hawkins. The old seadog's short legs carried him with surprising speed,

but Joe was more than a match for him as a sprinter.

He saw the sailor dodge into a doorway. Joe himself quickly ducked behind a truck.

After a moment, he saw Hawkins peer out from his refuge. Satisfied that he had shaken off his pursuer, the seaman walked calmly along the row of stores and entered a grocery shop.

Joe went to the window of the shop and stealthily looked in. Hawkins was at the counter, ordering a supply of groceries.

"I guess that'll hold him for a while," Joe mused.

He went back to the phone booth in the drugstore and called Frank.

"Meet me as fast as you can," Joe instructed his The Vanishing Sailor 149

brother. He recounted briefly Hawkins' meeting with the man with the limp and described the location of the store from which he was telephoning.

Frank hung up.

"It was Joe," he explained to Mr. Hardy. "He's trailed Hawkins to a grocery store on the water front. It looks to Joe as though the sailor's buying a lot of supplies."

"They probably are for Klenger and his gang up on the mountain," Mr. Hardy decided, after Frank had relayed to him Joe's information.

Frank nodded and slipped into his jacket.

"I wish you'd come to Skull Mountain with us, Dad," he declared. "I bet working together, we could clear up the mystery of Dr. Foster's disappearance in no time!"

His father smiled.

"I'm expecting an important phone call from Washington," he told Frank. "I'll join you and Joe as soon as it's come through."

Frank picked up the basket of food Aunt Gertrude had packed for him while he was waiting for Joe's call, and went to the door.

"Good-bye, everybody!" he shouted.

Aunt Gertrude's head poked around the kitchen door, and Mrs. Hardy came running down the stairs.

"Don't jostle that basket!" his aunt snapped. "There's a lemon meringue pie on top!"

350 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Take care of yourself, Frank," his mother told him anxiously. "Remember, you've just been through a bad experience!"

Frank grinned at her reassuringly and kissed the •tip of her nose.

"I'll be all right, Mom."

He waved, and ran down the porch steps toward the roadster.

Joe was waiting for him impatiently outside the drugstore.

"Hawkins loaded the supplies in an old jalopy and lit out five minutes ago," he told Frank as he hopped into the seat beside him.

"Never mind," Frank said. "Maybe we'll catch up with him on the road. I wonder whose car it is."

A few miles out of Bayport on the highway leading toward Skull Mountain the boys saw a dilapidated old sedan ahead of them.

"That's the car!" Joe exclaimed.

Frank let the roadster slow down and adjusted its speed to the sedan's rattling pace.

"Think he'll lead us to Klenger-and maybe Dr. Foster?" Joe asked after a while.

"Hope so," Frank replied. "I doubt if he's going to eat all those groceries himself. From the look of that crate in the back seat of his car, he's got enough food to last him for weeks!"

A few miles farther, the sedan turned off onto the dirt road which led directly to the mountain. Frank The Vanishing Sailor 151

and Joe followed in the roadster at a discreet distance. At the foot of the narrow, winding trail which mounted the slope to the ridge, the jalopy stopped. Quickly Frank drove the roadster behind a clump of trees and braked.

A man the boys had never seen came out of the brush and helped Hawkins lift the heavy crate from the sedan. Together they started to carry it up the trail.

The boys waited until Hawkins and his companion were well up the path, then followed.

The trip to the top of the mountain took three times as *long* as it usually took the boys, for the men frequently had to stop to rest.

Finally, Hawkins and the stranger reached the crest of the mountain and disappeared over a rocky ledge. Frank and Joe quickly climbed the last steep section of the trail and peered along the crest of the ridge.

The stocky sailor and his helper had vanished-vanished so completely the earth seemed to have swallowed them up!

CHAPTER XVII

Mountain Smokestack

the two boys stared at each other. Then their eyes again traveled over the crest.

There was no sign of the men.

"What in heck happened to them?" Joe said at last.

Frank shook his head. "It beats me," he replied. "I don't see where they could possibly have disappeared to in the time it took us to follow them over the ledge."

The mountain ridge was covered with trees, rocks and underbrush. But at the top of the trail, where Frank and Joe were standing, the land was comparatively clear.

There were a few blueberry bushes which grew only as high as the boys' knees-much too shallow to conceal even a child.

"Come on," Joe said impatiently. "This is getting us nowhere."

They started down the valley toward the reservoir, and a half hour later they arrived at the camp.

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Mountain Smokestack 153

The boys had been away from the mountain for a little more than two-and-a-half days, but Bob and Dick greeted them as if they had been gone for years. It took them a full hour to

recount their various adventures since they last had seen the engineers.

"We're convinced now that Dr. Foster's disappearance is connected in some way with the water's escaping from the reservoir," said Joe as he finished his part of the story.

Frank winked at his brother.

"Have you and Dick any new theories about that, Bob?" he inquired innocently.

Bob's mouth grew stubborn. "I'm still sticking to my original theory," he said flatly.

"Somewhere in this blankety mountain is a subterranean passage which is draining the water into the sea."

"You're perfectly right," Joe told him solemnly.

"Eh?" Bob stared at him suspiciously.

Frank and Joe couldn't contain their news any longer.

"You're right, Bob!" Frank almost shouted. "There *is* a tunnel!"

"We found its outlet in the bay!" Joe cried.

"What-?"

"How-?"

The two engineers looked from one boy to the other. Finally Bob found his voice.

"Suppose we sit down and discuss this calmly," he said, the words almost sticking in his throat.

Frank told him of the articles the boys had planted 154 The Secret of Skull Mountain in the reservoir the night they had left for Bayport, and of finding the decoy and barrel stave two nights later in the bay.

"The water is escaping through the tunnel at night," the boy pointed out. "That's why your shingles didn't reveal any escaping currents during the day."

Dick looked puzzled.

"I don't get it," he said. "What's to stop the tunnel from draining off the water in the daytime, too?"

"That's where Klenger and the others come in," Joe told him. "They must have devised a way to drain off the water only when it suits them."

"And it suits them at night," Frank put in, "because they figure you'll have a tougher time tracing the current in the dark!"

Bob's jaw tightened grimly as he saw clearly now that the water shortage was no accident.

He stared at the mountain slopes, and the boys saw his fingers flex and tighten into fists.

Then the tall engineer turned back to them.

"Thanks to you fellows, we now know that the reservoir is not being emptied naturally,"

he said. "We even know some of the people who are interested in keeping the reservoir from filling. We know that

the thing is happening at night. So it is up to us to go on the night shift, too. But first, let's make one more try to see what we can find by daylight."

Mountain Smokestack 155

After lunch, the two engineers and the two boys set out to search for their first objective: the entrance to the subterranean channel.

They decided to approach the job systematically -Bob and Dick to circle the reservoir in the skiff and inspect the shore along the water line, Frank and Joe to accompany them along the shore and investigate the slopes a few feet above the present water line.

"You fellows know," said Bob, "that the level of the water rises during the day and lowers at night."

"In other words," Dick added, "there's a strip of land eight feet wide running around the reservoir. Every evening it is completely covered with water -and every morning it is completely above water."

"And somewhere in that strip," Bob said, "is the mouth of the tunnel-if we can only locate it."

Hour after hour passed as they inspected the strip, prodding and tearing away patches of densely matted vines and shrubs with long poles and sticks and hatchets.

The prickly foliage clung tenaciously to the rocky slope and painfully scratched the boys'

hands and ankles when they penetrated the underbrush for a closer inspection. But Frank and Joe were determined not to overlook a single suspicious-looking bit of terrain. Any

one of these dark-green patches might conceal the mouth of the underground passage.

After supper, they resumed their search. As dusk 156 The Secret of Skull Mountain began to settle over the valley, they saw that the water level again was beginning to lower.

The boys turned back toward the camp again. Then, in the clear yellow light which still bathed the top of Skull Mountain, they saw a column of smoke rising from the crest.

They watched it in silence. Then Frank gripped Joe's arm.

"Notice anything different about that smoke?" he asked.

Joe stared at it for a moment, then shook his head.

"Maybe it's because we're seeing it from another angle," Frank told him, "but it looks to me as though it's rising from the clearing where Hawkins and the other guy disappeared so suddenly at the top of the trail!"

"You're right!" Joe cried. "It is!"

They shouted to Bob and Dick in the skiff, saying they would join the engineers later, and started up the hillside.

Darkness closed in around them as they climbed steadily toward the still-visible stream of smoke.

"I hope it's still smoking when we get there," Joe grunted, as he mounted a particularly steep section of the slope. "I've run up and down this hill so often I feel like a mountain goat!"

No sooner had he spoken the words than the column of smoke disappeared.

Mountain Smokestack 157

Joe picked up a rock and threw it at the ridge.

"That does it!" he declared disgustedly. "From now on the whole mountain can go up in smoke, for all I care!"

Frank smiled in spite of himself. He felt much the same as Joe, but he was determined to find the source of the smoke.

"Come on," he urged. "We've almost reached the top. It would be foolish to turn back now."

"Okay."

Joe gave his assent reluctantly, but secretly he was still as eager as Frank to find the source of this baffling phenomenon.

Clambering over rocks in the now almost complete darkness, they finally arrived at the treeless patch at the top of the trail.

The boys had hoped that a few last wisps of smoke would be curling from the crest when they arrived there-but the air was clear of smoke.

"Not a trace of it left," said Joe.

"We'll wait," Frank decided. "If the smoke starts up again, we'll be here to spot it."

They made themselves comfortable on the ground. Overhead the stars were out, and a full moon was rising above the hill on the other side of the reservoir. The moon

made it almost as light as day. The night air was cool and fresh.

As they sat there, they suddenly saw a figure emerge from the trees beyond the clearing.

158 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Duck!" Frank whispered. "He's coming this way!"

They hid behind the rocky ledge at the top of the narrow mountain trail.

From this shelter they could see the figure clearly now in the moonlight. He looked more like a scarecrow than a man—a tall, gaunt, barefooted creature with shaggy hair. It was the mountain hermit!

The man came into the clearing, and Frank and Joe watched him closely. He was carrying an armful of fresh-cut firewood which he dumped beside a tangle of blueberry and thorn bushes. Then he looked around the ridge to make certain he was unobserved.

The boys shrank under the ledge as the bony, bearded creature went to the top of the trail and looked down. For a moment, it seemed inevitable that he would see them, but the black shadow thrown by the ledge screened their bodies.

Satisfied, the hermit went back to the patch of brush where he had dropped his load of wood. He seemed to be tugging at something, and in a moment the boys saw him lift upright a slab of rock about the size of a card table.

He pushed the slab to one side, exposing a narrow cleft in the mountaintop.

Then, cradling the wood in his arms, the hermit jumped into the fissure-and vanished from the boys' sight!

CHAPTER XVIII

The Escaping Stream

Frank and Joe ran to the spot and peered down the cleft in the mountaintop.

After a slight drop, the fissure appeared to turn sharply parallel with the surface of the ridge. Then the crack widened, and sloped gradually downward inside the mountain!

The boys looked at one another. Could this be the spot they had seen the smoke coming from?

"It must be," Frank said slowly. "The old man was carrying firewood."

"Zowie!" Joe exclaimed. "To think of the times we've walked past this crack and never knew it was here!"

"No wonder," Frank said, pointing to the rock slab.

They studied the slab closely. They saw that it could be lowered from the inside to close the crevice in the rocks. This obviously was what had occurred

ISO

160 The Secret of Skull Mountain when they had trailed the hermit on the last occasion. It was easy to see why one could pass this innocent-looking slab a hundred times without noticing it. This, too, must be the answer to the disappearance of Hawkins and his helper earlier in the day.

Obeying an impulse, Frank lowered himself to the landing formed by the cleft as it veered parallel with the mountain surface. He lifted his arms over his head and tugged the slab back into place. Then, waiting until Joe had a chance to see how it looked, he pushed the flat stone away from the opening again.

"It was perfect!" Joe told him. "Nobody could see the slab under all those bushes. Yet the rock covers the cleft completely!"

"But for the smoke to come out, the crack has to be open," Frank said. "In that case, the cleft could be spotted easily."

"Sure," his brother admitted. "But who's to see it? Since the squatters moved out, there's nobody on this part of the mountain except Bob and Dick and you and I—"

"And the hermit and Klenger's gang," Frank finished for him.

But Joe wasn't fazed.

"Klenger and his gang know about the cleft," he pointed out. "Hawkins uses it, and the others must know about it, too."

The Escaping Stream 161

Frank laughed. "You win, Joe."

With his flashlight, Frank stepped down into the rocky fissure and shot the beam into it.

The light revealed a gradually widening passage which sloped downward toward the heart of the mountain.

"Let's have a look," Joe said, dropping down beside his brother. He borrowed Frank's torch and played it on the walls

of the irregular passageway. They were grimy with smoke smudges.

"Come on!" he urged.

One behind the other, the boys squeezed through the slit. Then, crawling on their hands and knees, they started slowly down the tunnel.

Even with Joe's flashlight casting its reassuring beam in front of them, both boys experienced a sudden dread of this descent into the unknown.

Their vivid imaginations pictured danger lurking beyond every twist and turn in the tunnel-Klenger or a member of his gang, a wild beast, a cave-in which would snuff out their lives and bury them in a mountain tomb!

Joe's fingers encountered a cold, clammy object, half imbedded in the floor of the passage. He drew back his hand with a startled gasp-and the flashlight went skittering along the tunnel, then came to a stop with its beam shining directly on the object.

It was a human skull.

joe let out a sigh of relief.

"It's easy to see the hermit has traveled up and 162 The Secret of Skull Mountain down this shaft. Here is his trademark," he whispered with a grin.

Frank grinned back.

"But for Pete's sake hold on to that flash," he warned. "If we lose it, we'll be in a pretty fix!"

Joe retrieved the flashlight, and they crawled on.

Fifty feet farther, the low, narrow shaft turned sharply and a sudden gust of air struck the boys.

Joe shot the flashlight's beam ahead. The passage was greatly enlarged, being tall enough to stand up in and wide enough for two to walk abreast.; The boy uttered a low exclamation.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked.

"There are *two* tunnels ahead!" Joe told him. "'We've come to a fork!"

He crawled forward until he reached the enlarged section of the crevice, then stood up and pointed as Frank followed him.

"Which one shall we take?" Joe asked.

Frank studied the tunnels thoughtfully, carefully examining the rocky floor of their entrances for a possible clue. He straightened up and scratched his head. It was a toss-up.

"Let's go this way," he said, indicating the tunnel which forked to the left.

"Okay."

Their progress was much easier now, and far more rapid. The broad passageway sloped constantly downward, until the boys became convinced

The Escaping Stream 163
that they were in the very heart of the mountain.

The air in the passage was damp but pure, and they breathed it in gratefully.

"Wonder where it comes from?" Joe asked.

"Probably from the valley," Frank said, "although as near as I can figure, the tunnel doesn't seem to be sloping in that direction."

Down, down, they went. Suddenly the tunnel leveled off, and they came to what appeared to be a small landing place. Beyond the landing they could see that the shaft dropped sharply for several feet-and the boys felt a swift current of air.

Then they heard it.

Joe grabbed Frank's arm. "Listen!" he whispered.

From the depth below came the gurgle of running water!

The boys ran to the edge of the landing and Joe shot the beam of his flashlight at the foot of the drop.

Flowing through a narrow tunnel at the foot of their own shaft ran a swift, bubbling stream of water.

"It's the water from the reservoir!" Frank gasped, "How do you know?" Joe asked anxiously.

"It's got to be!" Frank told him. "It's flowing from the direction of the valley!"

"Directions don't mean much inside of a mountain," said Joe doubtfully.

"Well, there's one way to find out," Frank sighed.

164 The Secret of Skull Mountain "We'll come back here during the day. If the water *isn't* flowing, we'll *know* the tunnel runs from the reservoir!"

Excited over their discovery, the boys started back up the shaft. They climbed rapidly for they now were sure of their way.

When they reached the fork, Joe examined the floor of the right-hand passageway carefully with the flashlight. About a dozen feet from the fork he found a piece of bark. Here was all the proof they needed that the right fork led to the place where the wood was being burned.

Somewhere at the base of the shaft was a cavern, they believed, in which Klenger and his gang might even be holding Dr. Foster. But the boys felt it wiser to join forces with Bob and Dick before they undertook to investigate the right-hand passage.

Dropping on their hands and knees, the two youths crawled into the narrow fissure which led to the mountaintop.

Joe went ahead with the flashlight, Frank following a few feet behind. The air was thinner in the narrow shaft, and they crawled upward as rapidly as the narrow walls permitted.

They were still some distance from the top when Frank stopped and began to sniff the air. Coming toward them from the passage below was the odor of wood smoke!

In a flash, he remembered the open fissure at the top of the mountain-and groaned. In their eagerThe Escaping Stream
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ness to descend the shaft, he and Joe had completely overlooked the fact that the

hermit had left the opening exposed because he intended smoke to pour from it!

Frank saw Joe sniff the air, and knew that his brother also was aware of the odor.

"Hurry, Joel" he called throwing caution to the wind. "We've got to get out of here!"

The boys' fingers tore at the tunnel walls in their efforts to achieve greater speed.

The smoke was thicker now. It wreathed around them, stinging their eyes and making them cough.

"Put your handkerchief over your nose and mouth!" Frank shouted.

Joe nodded and obeyed.

They crawled on, praying that each turn in the narrow and tortuous shaft would be the last-and that they would see the starry sky and breathe the fresh mountain air.

Smoke now began to stream through the shaft in a dense cloud. The boys clutched at their throats and coughed until they thought their lungs would burst.

Frank stumbled and fell. He tried to rise, but the strength seemed to ebb from his legs.

"Keep going, Joe!" he called hoarsely. "I can't make it!"

He saw Joe turn and stagger toward him. Then the flashlight fell from his brother's hand-and the smoke-filled tunnel was plunged into darkness!

CHAPTER XIX

To the Rescue

How long he had been unconscious, Frank did not know.

His eyes still smarted from the smoke, and his throat was painfully sore. His eyelids fluttered weakly-and he saw a starry sky. Then a hand tilted a canteen toward his lips and cool mountain water dribbled into his parched mouth.

"Take it easy," a voice said. "You'll be all right."

Frank's eyes opened wide. It was Bob.

The youth raised himself on his elbows.

"Where-? What-?" Then he remembered, "Joe?" he asked anxiously. "Is he-?"

Bob pushed him back gently. "He's safe, too."

Frank sank back, relieved. "What happened?" he said, after a while.

"We saw the smoke when you and Joe started up the slope," Bob told him, "and figured you were going to investigate it."

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To the Rescue 167

"When the smoke disappeared and you didn't return," Dick added, "we came up on the ridge to find you."

Bob nodded. "Then we saw the open crevice and crawled in. Smoke started to come up and we were about to climb out when we saw your light. That's all," he concluded simply.

It was far from all, Frank knew. It must have taken plenty of courage and strength for Bob and Dick to rescue the boys from the smoke-filled tunnel at the risk of their own lives.

His lips smiled at the two engineers, but his eyes spoke his gratitude.

Joe stirred on the ground beside him, and Bob and Dick gave their attention to the other Hardy boy. Frank looked about him. A short distance away, smoke still was pouring in a tall column from the open fissure.

Some time later when they had returned to camp, Frank and Joe told the engineers in detail what had happened. Somewhere deep inside the mountain, they were convinced, was the scene of the Klenger gang's activities. When they described the gurgling stream at the base of the crevice, Bob and Dick stared.

"Do you think it was flowing from the valley?" Bob asked excitedly.

"That's my hunch," Frank told him.

The boys told the engineer of their plan to descend the crevice the next day. If they found the

168 The Secret of Skull Mountain water was not flowing, they could all be certain then that the tunnel at the base of the crevice ran from the reservoir and carried the water which Bayport so desperately needed.

"Dick and I will join you," Bob said promptly. "But first, we'll equip ourselves with gas masks," he added significantly, "or our next trip down the crevice may be our last!"

"There are some gas masks in your office in Bayport," Dick told him. "I stowed 'em there after our last field trip. Guess I'd better go get them."

"Let us get them!" Frank and Joe said in unison -then broke off, laughing.

Joe explained that it was important that the boys' father be told about the cavern they believed was concealed in the mountain, so he could take steps to assure the capture of Klenger's gang.

Bob agreed, and gave the youths the key to his office.

"You'll find the gas masks in the closet," Dick told them.

Once again, the Hardy boys found themselves on the highway between Skull Mountain and Bayport. They had arranged to meet the engineers at the crevice on top of Skull Mountain early in the morning.

Frank drove rapidly, and the cool night air rushing into the speeding roadster cleared away every sensation the boys retained of their desperate adventure in the smoky tunnel.

To the Rescue 169

They stopped at Bob's office to pick up the gas masks, then drove through the streets of Bayport. The usually bustling business section seemed strangely quiet and deserted, until the boys remembered it was almost midnight.

As they approached Klenger's shop, Frank slowed the car and the boys looked carefully through the plate-glass window. Then, swiftly, the elder Hardy boy brought the roadster to a stop a few feet beyond the store.

In the rear of the shop they had seen a light!

The boys walked stealthily back to the window and peered in through the glass. The glare came from a transom over the door of Klenger's office.

Joe tried the door of the shop. It was unlocked. He started to open it, but Frank motioned to him to wait.

"Hold it," he whispered.

Frank looked along the deserted street. In front of a fruit store, a few doors away, some empty crates had been piled at the curb to be picked up by the rubbish collectors.

He carried a crate to the door and stood it on its end. Then he stood on the crate and pushed open the door a few inches with one hand, while with the other he stuffed a portion of his handkerchief between the bell which announced a customer's entry into the shop and its hammer.

"It can't give us away now," he whispered to Joe with a grin, and pushed the door wide.

170 The Secret of Skull Mountain They slipped into the shop, closing the door quietly behind them.

The door to Klenger's office was closed, but the ransom was slightly ajar, and the boys could hear a faint murmur of voices.

Joe gestured to Frank, and they tiptoed toward the office. As they came to the end of the counter, they heard a muffled thumping.

"What was that?" Joe whispered, startled.

The thumping sounded again.

The boys leaned over the counter and looked down. Someone was lying on the floor of the store •-bound and gagged!

Joe ran around the counter and struck a match. A pair of eyes looked at him appealingly, and a voice made strangled noises behind the gag.

It was Chet Morton!

CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Klenger Intervenes

joe removed the gag from Chet Morton's mouth and loosened the short pieces of wire which bound his hands and feet.

"Wow!" Chet gasped. "Am I glad you two came along!"

"Not so loud," Frank cautioned him in a low voice, glancing toward the office.

"How did it happen?" Joe asked.

In an undertone Chet recounted how, after a late movie, he had walked through the neighborhood toward the lot where his car was parked and decided to pass by the plumbing shop to see if everything was in order.

To his surprise, he saw a light-and cautiously investigated. But a bell tinkled the moment Chet stepped into the shop, and he barely had time to bat an eye before he found himself bound and gagged and dumped behind the counter.

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172 The Secret of Skull Mountain "I guess I'm not much of a detective," Chet sighed dejectedly as the boys grinned. He looked at them queerly. "Hey," he inquired. "How come the bell didn't ring when *you* came in?"

Joe described Frank's use of the handkerchief.

"What I don't understand," the blond-haired boy whispered, frowning, "is why the men didn't lock the door after they discovered you were able to enter the shop."

"Lock's jammed," Chet replied promptly. "I heard one of the men say so."

"Who were the men, Chet?" Frank queried.

"Sweeper and Limpy," he told Frank. "They went into that office at the back of the store."

The three boys looked at the light in the transom over the closed door. Although they could hear the men's voices, the sound was too faint for them to distinguish the words.

Suddenly a new sound came through the slightly open transom—a sustained, rushing noise similar to the sound the boys used to make by blowing across the rim of a drinking glass.

The youths stared at one another, puzzled. Frank tiptoed close to the door and placed a chair beside it. He mounted the chair and gently pushed open the transom a few inches more. Then he looked inside the office.

Sweeper and the man with the limp were kneeling on the floor in front of a small iron safe. Sweeper Mrs. Klenger Intervenes 173

was holding an acetylene torch, and its bluish flame was cutting a circle through the metal around the lock of the safe.

Frank felt a tug at his trouser leg and looked down. It was Chet. Joe had discovered the door's keyhole was empty, and was intently observing the men through the tiny aperture.

But Chet was completely mystified as to what was taking place.

He looked up at Frank, his face tortured with curiosity. "What's going on?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Frank started to tell his impatient friend, then wisely decided to climb down from the chair lest his voice carry through the transom.

"They're cracking the safe with a blowtorch," he told Chet when he was standing beside him.

"Blowtorch!" the boy breathed. "Lemme see!"

He climbed eagerly up on the chair.

"Take it easy, Chet," Frank whispered urgently, "or you'll give us away!"

Chet nodded reassuringly, then tried to peek through the transom. But being inches shorter than Frank, he found his eyes were below the tilted glass.

"I can't see!" he whispered. "Try to locate a couple of books for me to stand on, willya?"

Frank sighed and nodded reluctantly. Something told him Chet was headed for trouble.

He brought back a few bound catalogues from the counter and stacked them on the seat of the chair.

174 The Secret of Skull Mountain Chet climbed on top of the stack, teetering precariously.

"Watch out-!" Frank whispered sharply.

He sprang forward to support the youth, but Chet was past all aid. He gave Frank a wild, despairing look as the catalogues skidded out from under him, and he had to leap to the floor past the tumbling books!

The boys heard startled exclamations from inside the office- and the acetylene torch was shut off.

"Behind the counter!" Frank whispered. "Quick!"

He pulled the chair from its position in front of the door, and then the three youths ducked behind the end of the long counter loaded with plumbing gadgets.

A moment later, the office door was flung open, and Sweeper stared out.

Limpy's face, pale with fright, appeared at the Hhin man's shoulder.

"What was it?" he asked, trembling.

Sweeper stared at the books sprawled near the upright chair. At that moment a black cat walked into the rectangle of light which streamed through the open doorway. He stopped and looked at the two men, then meowed piteously.

Sweeper laughed.

"A snooping cat-that's what it was!" he said, pointing.
"Must've jumped on the chair and knocked all those books off!"

Mrs. Klenger Intervenes 175

He picked up a book and threw it at the animal. The cat squealed with fright and anger, and ran to another part of the shop.

"Black!" Limpy whispered, staring after it. "That means bad luck!"

"Forget it," Sweeper told him shortly. He went back into the office. "Come on," he said impatiently. "We've got to finish this job."

The small man limped after him and closed the door.

Soon, the boys heard the sound of the acetylene torch again. They crept out from behind the counter, and Frank again placed the chair beside the door.

"This time," he whispered to Chet, "you stay on the floor where nothing can happen! hope!"

He stood on the chair and peered through the transom, while Joe resumed his position at the keyhole.

Sweeper and Limpy were concentrating on the safe, but their voices could be heard over the sound of the blowtorch.

"Plane all set for the getaway?" Sweeper asked.

Limpy nodded. "It's waiting for us at the south end of the airport."

Getaway! Airport!

Frank signaled a huddle.

"We've got to think of some way to stop them," he muttered to the others. "But how?"

176 The Secret of Skull Mountain "We'd better ask Dad to take a hand in this," Joe whispered. "Those men may have guns."

Frank approved, but Chet shook his head.

"Won't work," he whispered back. "Your dad's in Washington."

"Washington!" gasped Joe.

"He got a phone call shortly after you left for the mountain," Chet went on. "Said he'd be back as soon as he could."

Joe groaned inwardly. "And we wanted to tell him about the cavern!"

Chet looked interested, but Frank headed him off.

"If I know Dad, he'll be back in time for the fireworks." He turned to Chet. "The roadster's parked a few doors to the left of the shop," he said in a rapid undertone. "Drive to Chief Collig's house and bring him here!"

Chet quailed as he thought of the burly, gravel-voiced chief of police.

"In the middle of the night?" he protested. "I'll have to wake him up!"

"I don't care if you have to drag him out of bed!" Frank told him firmly. "Just bring the chief here as fast as you can!"

Chet sighed and tiptoed out of the shop.

Frank and Joe resumed their watch-Joe at the keyhole, Frank on the chair.

A few moments later, they saw the acetylene torch cut a complete circle through the metal of the safe, and the lock fell out onto the floor.

Mrs. Klenger Intervenes 177

The small but neavy door swung open, and Sweeper reached eagerly into the safe and took out a metal box. He snapped the lid open and dumped the contents of the box hurriedly on a desk.

The thin man fumbled through some papers impatiently, then snatched up an envelope.

He drew out a wad of currency.

"There it is!" he cried exultantly, flipping the bills with his thumb. "Five thousand bucks!

Klenger's promised me this cash ever since I started to do his dirty work-but he never delivered. Well, we're square now-even if Klenger doesn't know it!"

But Limpy wasn't listening. The small, furtive man was nervously poring through the scattered papers, wetting his lips and muttering under his breath.

Finally he found what he was so anxiously looking for-a bank check. He stared at it, his fingers trembling.

"That it?" Sweeper asked.

"Yes," Limpy told him. He looked at Sweeper, his mouth quivering. "For years, Klenger's been holding this against

me," he said, "-this check. I used to be a respectable accountant. I worked for Klenger. Then, to get more money for my family, I forged his name to this check." He broke off and stared at the slip of paper. "Klenger threatened to expose me-to have me sent to jail unless I helped him carry out his schemes. But now I have Klenger's evidence against me!" he said, his voice suddenly gleeful. "I'll destroy the check and be free!"

Sweeper laughed.

"We're both free, Limpy! You to go home to your family-me to spend five thousand smackers!"

So engrossed were the boys with the scene inside Klenger's office that they almost failed to notice that someone was entering the street door of the shop.

Frank turned sharply as he heard the front door close, and saw the shadowy figure of a woman outlined against the glass panel.

He snapped his fingers to attract Joe's attention, then stepped softly down from the chair.

A moment later, from behind the counter, the boys saw the woman approach the office and open (the door. The light fell on her face.

"It's Mrs. Klenger!" Joe whispered excitedly.

The woman stared at the open safe, then at Sweeper and Limpy.

"What are you two doing here?" she said coldly,

CHAPTER XXI

Midnight Arrest

Chet stopped the roadster in front of Chief Collig's house and got out.

The house was dark, just as he feared. He would have to rout the burly police chief out of bed. Chet sighed heavily and started unhappily up the walk to the porch.

"Everything happens to me," he observed gloomily.

He climbed the porch steps and rang the doorbell. There was no answer. Bracing himself for the blast he was sure would come, the boy rang again.

A light flashed on in the downstairs hall, and Chief Collig came down the stairs, pulling a bathrobe around his portly body.

The chief's eyes were heavy with sleep, and his face wore a scowl that made Chet

quake inwardly.

The policeman flung open the door.

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180 The Secret of Skull Mountain "What d'ya mean by waking me up in the middle of the night?" he roared.

"I had to, Chief," Chet explained hastily. "It's important!"

Collig stared at him, and his scowl deepened.

"Oh, so it's you, is it?" He shook a stubby finger under Chet's nose. "If this is one of your tricks, Chet Morton, I'll-I'll-!"

Chet backed away. "Honest, Chief," he stammered, "it's on the level!"

"It'd better be!" Collig threatened. "Or I'll lock you up for disturbing the peace!"

It appeared to Chet that Collig himself was guilty of that, with his loud, angry voice, but he meekly held his tongue.

"What is it you want?" the police chief growled.

Chet hurriedly explained the situation at the plumbing shop. When he mentioned Frank and Joe, Collig's bushy eyebrows bristled.

"You mean the Hardy kids are in this, too?" he demanded.

Chet nodded. "Hurry, Chief!" he pleaded. "I've got a car waiting!"

He took the officer's arm, and Collig started down the steps-then remembered he was attired in pajamas and robe.

He shook off the boy's hand. "Wait'll I change into my uniform," he snapped. He went into the house and started up the stairs. "But I'm warning you, if this is a joke-"

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His words were lost as he disappeared around a turn in the stairs.

A short time later, Chet drove up to the plumbing shop.

Collig took out his service revolver and slipped off the safety catch.

"Golly," Chet said nervously, "do you suppose there'll be any shooting?"

"Can't tell," the chief grunted. "But if there is, I'm ready for 'em!"

He got out of the car, and Chet followed him. Frank and Joe met them at the door of the shop.

"Sweeper and Limpy are back there where the light is," Frank whispered to Collig.

"Mrs. Klenger's there, too," Joe added. "She jusi walked in on them."

Chief Collig drew his gun and walked to the rear of the shop, his burly figure filling the doorway of the office.

"All right, lady," he said. "Step aside there."

The three boys saw Mrs. Klenger whirl around with a startled look.

"What's the idea?" the middle-aged woman asked.

"You're all under arrest!" the chief announced gruffly.

"I ain't!" Mrs. Klenger declared.

Collig looked at Frank. The boy nodded.

"You're coming, too, lady," the chief said firmly, "You can't arrest me!" Mrs. Klenger's voice rose shrilly. "I ain't guilty o' nothin'I My husband

182 The Secret of Skull Mountain owns this shop! I came here for some papers my husband asked me to get for him and found these two crooks"-she pointed a bony finger at Sweeper and Limpy-"breakin* into the safe! They're the guilty ones!"

Collig's mouth tightened. "You're still coming along with me!" he said.

The woman put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "What for?" she shouted.

"I'm holding you as a witness," the chief snapped back promptly. Mrs. Klenger flashed Chief Collig a bitter look and subsided.

The chief produced a pair of handcuffs and snapped the links on Limpy's left wrist and Sweeper's right, handcuffing the two men together.

The boys watched as the chief marched his three prisoners to the door.

"That takes care of a few of the gang," Joe said, grinning. "Now for the others!"

CHAPTER XXII

The Secret Tunnel

daylight was breaking over Skull Mountain Frank and Joe climbed to the top of the narrow trail.

Bob and Dick were waiting for them on the ridge,, The boys unslung the gas masks from their shoulders and handed one to each of the engineers, keeping a mask apiece for themselves.

"See your dad?" Bob questioned them, looping (the strap of his mask around his neck.

"Dad wasn't home," Frank told him. "But we left a message for him to hurry out here the minute he returns. By the way, you'll be glad to know that Sweeper, Limpy and Klenger's wife are safe in She jug."

"When did all that happen?" asked Bob.

Frank related their adventure at Klenger's shop with Chet the evening before. Bob and Dick

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184 The Secret of Skull Mountain laughed heartily when Joe described how Chet had! roused Chief Collig from his sleep.

By now it was bright daylight.

"Are we all set?" Bob asked.

They chorused their assent, and the tall engineer strode toward the patch of blueberry and thorn bushes where the

cleft in the mountaintop was concealed.

A moment later, the thin, rectangular slab of rock had been lifted, and the narrow opening of the crevice was exposed.

Bob turned to the boys. "Guess you two better go first," he said. "You know the way."

The youths agreed, and taking a flashlight from his jacket Joe slid into the fissure and squeezed through the narrow slit which widened into a sloping shaft.

Frank followed-then Bob and Dick. Crawling on their hands and knees, the four started down inside the mountain.

They came to the fork and Joe paused.

"This shaft leads to the stream," he informed the engineers, pointing to the tunnel at the left of the fork. "Frank and I figure the other shaft drops down to a cavern where Klenger's gang hides out."

"We'll take a look at it when we come up," Bob promised.

They descended the passageway which led to the underground stream, walking erect now that the crevice was large enough to stand in.

Ille Secret Tunnel Suddenly, the passage leveled off-and the boy* quickened their strides as they saw the small landing, beyond the landing, they knew the shaft dropped abruptly to the tunnel which carried the under Around stream 1

"Come on!" Joe urged the engineers. "This is it!"

They ran to the edge of the landing and listened There was no sound from the base of the shaft.

Joe knelt on the rocky floor and beamed his flash light at the foot of the drop-Clearly visible in the ray of light was the narrow tunnel where the night before the boys had seen a swift-flowing stream of water.

Now the tunnel was damp, and tiny pools of water sparkled in the light. But the stream itself was not flowing!

"That proves it!" Frank declared, his eyes shining. "It's the tunnel which runs from the reservoir!"

Bob nodded. "There's no doubt about it now," he said slowly. He stared down at the damp channel. "There can be only one explanation why the water runs from the reservoir

through that passage at night-and not during the day," he added. "And that's a lock!"

He explained briefly to the boys how a simple lock could be set up in the tunnel to sluice or dam the flow of the water at will.

"The lock is probably close to the mouth of the tunnel-where the channel is wider," he concluded.

186 The Secret of Skull Mountain Dick grinned. "All we have to do now," he pointed out, "is what we've been trying to do all along-locate the mouth of the tunnel in the valley and close it up!"

Bob's mouth twisted wryly. "You're a cheerful soul," he told his friend.

"Maybe we could block off the tunnel here," Joe said eagerly, indicating the channel at the base of the shaft.

Bob shook his head. "The block wouldn't hold in such a small space against the pressure of a fast-flowing stream," he replied.

Joe poked his flashlight at the jagged gap in the rock where the tunnel snaked underground toward the valley.

"As long as the water's dammed up during the day," he said hopefully, "one of us might be able to crawl through the tunnel to the mouth!"

"Nothing doing!" Frank told his younger brother promptly. "That hole is small enough as it is-and the passage might get a lot smaller as it goes along!"

"Frank's right, Joe," Bob said. "It sounds like a nice way to commit suicide!" He sighed.

"We'll just have to keep hunting for the mouth of the tunnel till we find it."

"I think we'll know more when we explore the Tight-hand passageway," said Frank.

But when they reached the fork, it was decided to press on to the top of the crevice and have lunch at The Secret Tunnel 187

the camp before investigating the right-hand shaft.

They stood on the mountaintop and breathed the clear, cool air. Then Bob dropped the slab into place over the narrow opening of the cleft, and they started back to camp for a hasty lunch.

It was noon when the Hardy boys and the engineers again headed toward the ridge. But just as they entered the trail

that led up the steep side of Skull Mountain, they heard a roar above them. A huge mass of rock, gravel and boulders was hurtling down the trail. It sounded like the roar of a great waterfall.

"Rockslide!" Bob yelled. "Take cover!"

For a horrified instant, they stood transfixed. Then, slipping and falling on the sliding gravel and loose, rolling stones near the foot of the slope, they scrambled for safety.

The sound of falling boulders, tree trunks and sliding gravel swelled into a roaring crescendo as the rockslide swiftly gathered momentum.

Giant, jagged rocks bounded past the boys and splashed into the water of the reservoir.

The entire slope appeared to be a roaring, ripping, writhing, tangled mass of boulders, mangled trees and sliding earth!

"Get behind this ledge-quick!" shouted Bob above the roar of the rockslide. He pointed to a solid ledge with a slight overhang about twenty feet from the reservoir.

188 The Secret of Skull Mountain The two boys and the engineers cowered behind the protecting ledge. From where they lay it looked as though the whole side of the mountain were moving.

Then, as though it were a hand roughly pulling aside a curtain, the rockslide tore away the dark-green patch of foliage just beyond where the terrified spectators were cowering.

Where the green patch had been, Frank, Joe and the engineers saw a gaping hole at the side of the slope, almost

at the water's edge.

It was the mouth of the tunnel-the subterranean passage which the Tarnack River, centuries before* had wain through the mountain to escape to the seaS

CHAPTER XXSii

Captured!

the rockslide stopped as suddenly as it had started. The boys and the engineers waited until the last boulder had rumbled down the slope and splashed into the reservoir, and the dust began to settle over the rock-torn area. Then they emerged from their shelter and started for the tunnel.

The tunnel's mouth, so unexpectedly revealed in the side of the slope, was an almost rectangular gap about twelve feet high and fourteen feet wide.

The floor of the tunnel was somewhat lower on the left side, and this depression obviously served as a sluiceway to carry water from the river through the subterranean passage to Barmet Bay.

The Hardy boys, Bob and Dick stared at the secret tunnel with undisguised awe. Here before them was nature's own solution to a problem—a prehistoric outlet that a rushing river, dammed up

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190 The Secret of Skull Mountain by a glacial moraine, had drilled through a mountain that it might escape to the sea. Bob looked at the others. Then, as if in complete accord, unspeaking, they stepped into the boulder-strewn passage.

Proceeding cautiously for a short distance into the tunnel, they saw that the sluiceway deepened gradually into a ditch which leveled off six feet below the floor of the main passage. The tunnel itself sloped gradually downward.

The side walls of the tunnel were composed of shale and clay and limestone. In several places, the boys saw, the walls were pitted with freshly dug holes, and along the floor of the passage were small piles of gray clay.

Frank pointed. "What do you make of them?" he asked Bob in a low voice.

The engineer knelt beside a pile and examined the clay with interest. Then he stood up and shook his head.

"Don't know," he replied. "Maybe we'll find out farther on."

Joe caught Bob's eye and pointed to deep imprints in a damp section of the floor.

Between the imprints were droppings of clay.

"Wheelbarrow tracks!" the boy whispered. "We must be getting close to the place where the gang is operating!"

The sunlight, streaming through the open mouth Captured!
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of the passage, had enabled the four explorers to see for a distance of several feet. But directly ahead, the tunnel twisted sharply and was lost in darkness.

"Gosh," said Dick. "We must have left our flashlights back there at the ledge where we took shelter."

"I'll go back to the camp and get a couple," Frank offered.

Joe, venturing as far as the turn, came back and intercepted his brother.

"We don't need flashlights," he said quietly. "Klenger's men have spaced lanterns all along the passage!"

In the flickering light of the lanterns, they saw that the water in the sluiceway, which had been a few feet deep at the mouth of the tunnel, was now almost level with the top of the ditch. And beyond a second bend in the passage, they came to a crude but effective wooden lock.

It was modeled after a canal lock, with two door-like wings made of planks which met in the center. When the wings were closed, as they were now, the water was impounded.

Behind the lock, the ditch or canal was dry.

"There's the gadget that operates it," Bob whispered.

He indicated an iron wheel at the side of the tunnel, resembling the brake wheel of a railway freight car. By turning the wheel, Bob explained, the sluice gates could be opened and shut.

192 The Secret of Skull Mountain The boys studied the lock. It was clear now why the level of the water in the reservoir rose during the day and sank at night.

They continued along the passage, the sound of their footsteps deadened by the shale and clay of the tunnel floor.

They were certain that the cavern in which the gang centered their activities must be fairly deep inside the mountain, otherwise the men surely would have heard the rockslide on the surface.

Suddenly, as they were about to turn another bend in the tunnel, they heard footsteps approaching. They scrambled back hastily and looked for a place in which to hide.

There was only one-the sluiceway.

"Into the ditch," Bob ordered in a barely audible tone. "And when you hear him round the bend-duck!"

They slipped noiselessly into the empty sluiceway and clung to the edge of the ditch. A moment later, they heard the footsteps rounding the bend.

All four held their breaths as the man passed along the tunnel just above their heads.

They saw the man's face in the light of a lantern as he briefly inspected the lock. It was Sailor Hawkins. Satisfied, he started back down the passage.

They lifted themselves out of the sluiceway the moment the old seaman had disappeared around the bend.

Captured! 193

They moved forward again, their eyes searching eagerly for the cavern they knew must be ahead. Soon they came to a small cave cut in the wall of the tunnel, and Joe poked his head in for a look around.

He withdrew it with a start. On the floor of the cave was a stack of human skulls!

"The hermit's supply room," he whispered weakly.

Finally they arrived at their destination. A cleft in the rock Avail of the main passage sloped upward from the floor for several feet, then expanded into a deep cavern. The fissure narrowed again on the opposite side of the cavern, and rose gradually toward the top of the mountain.

Frank pointed to it as they stared into the giant cave.

"Must be the shaft which joins the other shaft at the fork," he whispered.

Bob nodded. "Flatten out," he ordered.

They lay flat on the sloping floor of the crevice, their heads just below the level of the cavern. Then, lifting their heads cautiously, they studied the occupants of the cave.

In one corner of the underground room Sailor Hawkins was sawing expertly through a wooden plank. The saw-toothed steel blade bit into the wood with swift, efficient strokes, and the boys observed that the seaman was cutting a board the same width and length as the planks in the wooden lock.

194 The Secret of Skull Mountain "Looks as though Hawkins built the lock," Bob whispered.

The boys looked at one another and grinned. They suspected that the old sailor had been pulling their leg when he told them the sad tale of his ship cracking up on a reef.

"Bet he was a ship's carpenter, instead of a ship's captain!" Joe breathed.

As they watched from their place of concealment, they saw the hermit. The thin, gaunt figure of the hermit came staggering down the shaft from the mountaintop, his arms laden with split cordwood. He dropped the wood on the floor of the cavern, then walked over to the corner of the room to the left of the shaftway.

Frank tugged at Bob's sleeve, and the engineer passed the signal along to the others. A few feet to the left of the

opening in the cavern wall a frail, slightly stooped, professorial-looking man with white hair was standing before a kiln, examining some gray clay he had taken from the oven. Beside the kiln stood a wheelbarrow, heaped with what looked like mud.

The mountain hermit approached the man at the kiln in a very deferential manner.

"That must be Dr. Foster!" Joe said in an excited whisper.

Frank nodded. "What's he doing?" he asked.

Joe shook his head, and Bob whispered back: Captured! 195

"I don't know. But it must be pretty important, or Klenger wouldn't be so anxious to keep the water from rising over the clay deposits in the valley."

"Think Foster is a member of the gang?" Dick queried.

"I doubt it," Frank replied, keeping his voice down. "He doesn't look like the sort of man who would get involved in anything crooked-unless he was forced."

Their eyes again turned to the kiln. The fire door below had been opened, and the man of the mountain was stoking it with wood. A cloud of smoke poured from the galvanized-iron stack which led from the kiln and into the shaftway beyond.

Here was the explanation for the columns of smoke they had so frequently seen. The smoke from the green wood was funneled up the shaft from the kiln. A column of smoke issued forth from the crevice at the top of the mountain only

when the kiln was being stoked with green wood in the cavern far below.

As they watched, two men entered the cavern from a small bay a few feet at the right of the shaft. One was a stocky, surly-looking man with red hair. The other was a smaller man dressed in a clay-spotted business suit.

Frank started.

"The first man is Klenger!" he whispered to the others excitedly. "The smaller fellow is the stranger 196 The Secret of Skull Mountain who was with Klenger and Sweeper the night they cast me adrift!"

"Guess that accounts for everybody!" Joe whispered.

The two men joined Dr. Foster and stared at the kiln.

"What about it, Foster?" the stranger said impatiently. "Is it bauxite or not?"

Dr. Foster turned to the man.

"I've told you again and again, Mr. Stoper," he began, "I need more time to make the-"

"Time!" Stoper barked. "If I hear that word again, I'll go batty!" He stubbed his finger into the scientist's chest. "I want results-do you hear?"

"Take it easy, Ben," Klenger intervened, putting his hand on the smaller man's arm. "The old man's doing the best he can."

Bauxite! Ben!

Now the parts to the puzzle were falling into place! Bauxite was the precious mineral the gang hoped to extract from the clay! And Ben was the signer of the telegram Klenger had received-apparently the leader of the gang! He was the man who had arrived at the rendezvous off Merriam Island the night Frank had tried to overhear the conference from the tender of Sweeper's speedboat.

"We'd better go back and notify the police," Bob whispered. He turned to Frank and Joe. "Maybe Captured! 197

your dad's back from Washington and can take charge."

The two youths and the engineers rose noiselessly from their hiding place and started down toward the subterranean passage. Before they had taken ten steps, they were confronted by a man carrying a deadly looking revolver. It was the stranger Frank and Joe had seen helping Hawkins carry the groceries!

"Get going!" he ordered, motioning with the gun toward the cavern room beyond.

CHAPTER XXIV

Dr. Foster Explains

Klenger and Ben Stoper stared as the Hardy boys and the engineers were herded into the room.

"Where'd you find them?" Stoper demanded of the man who held the gun.

The man jerked his head. "Just outside-in the runway," he replied.

Klenger's face hardened. "How'd you confounded snoops locate the tunnel?" he asked the boys harshly.

"Rockslide," Frank told him.

The man's eyes narrowed with disbelief.

"Don't hand me that," he said sharply.

"It's true," Joe put in. "It tore away the curtain of foliage at the mouth of the tunnel. If this cavern weren't so deep underground, you'd have heard it."

Stoper turned to the boys' captor.

"Give me that gun," he directed. He pointed it at the four prisoners. "Now, take a look and see if these kids are telling the truth."

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The man nodded and hurried out of the cave.

"You're wasting time," Klenger told Stoper. "It's true or they wouldn't be here. They'd never have located the passage any other way."

Stoper's mouth twisted bitterly.

"This is the finish," he told the stocky, redheaded plumber. "Now anybody can walk in here and see what we're doing!"

Klenger smiled soothingly. "No use to get upset, Ben," he said. "There's nobody around this part of the mountain except them." He jerked his thumb at the prisoners. "We'll camouflage the hole with loose rock before anybody else has a chance to see it!"

The smaller man appeared to be somewhat mollified.

"Hawkins!" he called. He gave the ex-sailor the gun and nodded toward the prisoners.

"Take them into the bay and tie them up."

The two youths, Bob and Dick were marched into the small room which adjoined the cavern. It was this room from which Klenger and Stoper had emerged a short time before.

The prisoners were ordered to lie on their stomachs on the damp floor of the darkened room, then their hands and feet were securely tied.

Minutes dragged into hours. The boys and the engineers had discussed every possibility of escape soon after they were imprisoned in the cell, but now had subsided into worried

silence, each occupied 200 The Secret of Skull Mountain with his own thoughts. What Klenger would do with them, they did not dare guess. But one thing was certain: he would not allow them to go free and expose his plans.

After what seemed an eternity, they heard footsteps approaching the room in which they were imprisoned. A moment later Hawkins appeared-marching Dr. Foster before him at gun point!

Directing the scientist to lie on the floor, he quickly proceeded to tie his hands and feet.

Frank rolled on his side and looked at the white-haired man as Hawkins clumped out of the room.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I ascertained that there is no bauxite contained in the clay," the scientist replied with dry humor. "So they have no further use for me."

He twisted on his side so he could see his fellow prisoners.

"No doubt you're all wondering why I'm mixed up with these reckless men," he went on.

"It appears we shan't be too occupied during the next half hour, so perhaps what I say will help to pass the time."

Several years ago, he told them, before Tarnack Dam had even been blueprinted, he had prospected for bauxite on Skull Mountain. He had read the geological theory of the subterranean passage but believed it to be fiction until, poking along the hillside-then densely forested-he had come upon the

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mouth of the tunnel about twenty or twenty-five feet up from the river bed.

"I explored the tunnel with great excitement," the scientist said, "and discovered deposits of clay which seemed to contain the mineral I was searching for."

He coughed, chilled by the damp floor, then continued.

"Deep inside the mountain, I found the cavern, and a cleft running clear to the top of the ridge! I gentlemen, I felt as if I had stumbled upon one of the geological miracles of prehistoric times!"

His voice shook with remembrance of the experience.

"How do Klenger and Stoper fit into this?" Joe asked.

Klenger, Dr. Foster explained, had been recommended to him as a man who could raise money to work the clay deposits in the tunnel. The scientist had told Klenger he was not positive the clay contained bauxite but wanted an opportunity to test the substance and find out.

Klenger had been tremendously interested in the project, and persuaded Dr. Foster to show him the tunnel. But the plumber failed to raise the money, and plans for developing the vein of bauxite had to be abandoned.

"Then, about five weeks ago," the scientist went on, "I received a telegram from Klenger. He told me a group of men headed by Ben Stoper had agreed to put up the money for the project. He insisted that I come to Bayport at once."

Dr. Foster's voice became bitter.

"I took a leave of absence from my work and joined Klenger. We came here and began to break down the clay. Then I discovered I was no longer a partner in the project-but a prisoner! That all Klenger and the others wanted me for was to make the tests to confirm the presence of the bauxite!"

"And to keep the valley clear to mine the stuff once it was discovered to be bauxite,"

Bob said, "Klenger had to keep the reservoir from filling up."

The scientist nodded.

"He persuaded Hawkins to build the wooden lock," he explained. "The old sailor was highly incensed at the prospect of losing his home because of the water project, and Klenger found him a willing ally in his scheme to divert the water to the sea."

"Where does Potato Annie fit in the picture?" asked Bob.

Dr. Foster said that Potato Annie had helped the gang for the same reason-supplying them with fresh vegetables from her garden.

"What about that shaggy old guy?" Frank asked.

"Yes," Joe said grimly. "We've plenty of things to settle with him!"

Dr. Foster coughed gently.

"I can well imagine how you feel about Tom Dr. Foster
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Darby," he said, "but I hope you won't hold him responsible for all of his actions. He's devoted to me-and terrified of the others. He told me Klenger threatened to send him back to the county farm if he did not obey orders. Otherwise, I'm sure he would have helped me to escape."

"Who is the old fellow?" Dick wanted to know.

Tom Darby was, in truth, a hermit, the scientist told them. He had run away from the county poor farm in the adjoining state, and had hidden on the mountain.

"I met Tom on my first trip to Skull Mountain," Dr. Foster declared. "He was half starved and nearly naked. But when I tried to help him, he thought I meant to take him back to the poor farm-and ran away."

The scientist smiled at his recollection of the shaggy-haired scarecrow fleeing down the mountainside.

"Later, I won the old fellow's confidence," he went on, "and from then on, Tom couldn't do enough for me. When I returned this summer, he was still here-and he remembered me.

He lived in the tunnel, and from what I can gather he had been subsisting pretty much on raw vegetables from Annie's garden, with an occasional handout from one of the other squatters.

He used to steal also from the contractors' stores when they were working on the dam." Dr.

Foster's eyes twinkled. "It was 204 The Secret of Skull Mountain Tom's idea to frighten you with skulls. Klenger told

Tom anything he did to scare you away from the mountain would be of great help to me!"

"Tom must think an awful lot of you, sir," Joe said ruefully. He certainly did his best to get rid of us!"

Dick interrupted. "Boulders, an explosion, a Hre-"

"I'm afraid the old fellow was overzealous in his efforts to keep you people away from this region," the scientist said. "It was Sweeper who supplied Tom with the dynamite. And it was Klenger who let fire to your shack. Darby wouldn't commit mur-vier any more than I would."

He stopped speaking, for at that moment Klenger came into the bay and set a lantern on the floor in front of him. He looked around at them with a thin smile, savoring the suspense his entrance had caused, then his mouth hardened.

"Foster's probably told you our job is finished," he said harshly. "We're pulling out."

Frank and Joe looked hopefully at one another, but their hopes were soon dashed.

"Before we go," Klenger was saying, "I'm going to fix it so you won't be able to tell your story to the cops."

He stopped to make sure that all the prisoners were paying attention to what he was saying.

"One way to do it," he continued, "would be to Dr. Foster Explains 205

dump you in the sluiceway and open up the gates. Maybe your bodies would, reach Barmet Bay-and maybe they

wouldn't."

He stared at them thoughtfully.

"Trouble is," he said finally, "I can't afford to take chances. So I'm goin' to have Hawkins dynamite the mouth of the tunnel and close it up. That way nobody'll ever know what happened to you."

He picked up the lantern and turned away with a sardonic grin.

"After the tunnel's shut off," he said, "there won't be any more trouble getting the water to rise in the reservoir. Some Bayport folks-but not all-will be getting plenty of water from now on!"

CHAPTER XXV

Smoked Out

klenger's words echoed hollowly in the space the trussed-up prisoners lay.

They stared at one another, but nothing was said. Nothing needed to be said. Their faces, pale and tense, spoke eloquently for them.

They heard Klenger in the cavern instructing Hawkins in the use of the dynamite.

Then Frank remembered the crevice.

"We've still got a chance!" he whispered to the others. "If we can only break out of these ropes, we can climb the shaft and escape through the top of the mountain!"

But almost as if he had heard the boy's words, Klenger cut off their last means of escape.

"After you've blasted the mouth of the tunnel," the red-haired man told Hawkins, "come back here and set off another charge to plug the shaft that leads to the ridge. That'll shut off the crevice and seal everything nice and tight."

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"Aye, cap'n," the sailor replied. "But how are we to get away?"

"Up the shaft, you fool. Stopper an' me'll start up toward the ridge while you blow the tunnel. You'll follow after you've blasted the shaft right here where it joins the cavern. Now get going."

The prisoners heard the sailor's footsteps recede, then there was silence. They struggled desperately with the ropes that bound them. Unless they could break free in the few minutes remaining before Hawkins set off his charge, they would be buried alive!

They rolled close to one another, their fingers tearing at each other's ropes-but the strands were wet from the damp floor and resisted the prisoners' frantic attempts to untie them.

"There must be some way out of this!" Bob said desperately.

He lifted his wrists to a jagged edge of rock, and awkwardly tried to saw through the binding hemp, but gave up, exhausted.

At that moment the hermit, Darby, staggered into the cavern from the shaftway, his arms piled with firewood. He stared into the prisoners' room, then dropped his load of wood and came quickly to where Dr. Foster was lying on the ground.

"Tom!" the scientist exclaimed. He waggled his hands behind his back. "Hurry, Tom!"

he implored the hermit. "Untie them!"

The shaggy-haired man cast a terrified glance over 208 The Secret of Skull Mountain his shoulder, then bent over the scientist without speaking, his fingers fumbling with the rope. Frank and Joe and the two engineers looked on, hardly

daring to breathe. It seemed too good to be true that help at last was at hand.

Frank's mouth suddenly framed a warning-but too late. Klenger came striding swiftly into the cave and struck the hermit on the head with a slab of firewood.

The man of the mountain slid unconscious to the floor!

Klenger glanced at the rope which secured the scientist's wrists, then gave a satisfied grunt and went out.

A moment later, the prisoners saw Klenger and Ben Stoper start up the shaft toward the top of the mountain.

"There they go," Joe said tensely. "Pretty soon Hawkins will follow them, and then-"

He broke off, but the others knew what he meant. Then their efforts would be useless.

Bob rolled his body toward the hermit, then sat up and, by twisting his bound wrists, managed to unscrew the cap of the canteen on his hip. He tilted the flask so that water splashed on Darby's face.

The hermit stirred, and his eyelids fluttered weakly. Bob splashed his face again, then dribbled water into his wide-open mouth.

The hermit looked at him dazedly.

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"You've done it, Bob!" Frank exclaimed excitedly.

Bob turned to the scientist. "Hurry, Dr. Foster," he said. "Make Tom untie these ropes!"

Within a few minutes the hermit had freed Dr. Foster's hands and feet. Then the two men set io work on the others.

Soon, all the prisoners stood free.

"Come on, Dick!" Bob cried. "We've got to stop Hawkins before he seals the tunnel opening!"

"Suits me!" his assistant replied.

They raced through the cavern and into the lantern-lighted tunnel.

"We'll follow Klenger and Stoper!" Joe yelled after them. He ran to the shaft which sloped toward the mountaintop.

"Come on, Frank!"

"Joe-wait!"

Joe stopped, puzzled.

"We won't gain anything by trying to overtake those men," Frank told the youth rapidly.

"Klenger's got a gun!"

"But we can't let them get away!" Joe pleaded.

"They won't!" Frank promised.

He signaled to Dr. Foster and Tom Darby tc follow him and went quickly to the kiln.

Pointing toward the pile of green firewood, he directed:

"Keep feeding the fire until you get up plenty of smoke, then bank it. We just want to feed Klenger and Stoper enough

smoke to make them helpless," he said, "not suffocate them!"

210 The Secret of Skull Mountain The scientist nodded his understanding, and Joe's face broke into a grin.

"We'll give them a dose of the medicine they gave us!" he declared.

The two youths slipped on their gas masks which were still slung over their shoulders.

Joe grabbed a lantern. Then they started up the shaft after the two men.

They came upon Klenger and Stoper in the narrow fissure near the top of the crevice.

Smoke streamed through the narrow tunnel, and in the light of the lantern the boys saw the men clutching at their throats as they gasped for air.

They quickly dragged the helpless pair through the opening in the mountaintop. Then, when they had disarmed them, the boys took off their masks.

"Look who's coming!" cried Frank.

Climbing up the mountainside came Bob and Dick. And a few steps behind them came Chet and Fenton Hardy!

"Dad!" Frank exclaimed with delight when they reached the top of the trail. "When did you arrive on Skull Mountain?"

"Not long ago," Mr. Hardy said. "But not soon enough to give you and Joe much of a hand in capturing the Klenger gang, it appears."

"Don't believe him," Bob told the boys. "When Dick and I got to the mouth of the tunnel, your dad already had Hawkins in handcuffs!"

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"I left him at the foot of the hill in care of a couple of FBI men," Mr. Hardy explained. He turned to Klenger and Stoper. "The FBI especially wants you two," he told them, "for holding Dr. Foster against his will. Maybe you haven't heard, but kidnaping is a Federal offense!"

Your pals already are safe in jail!"

The two men stared at Mr. Hardy but said nothing.

"Hey!" Chet demanded. "Don't I get any attention? I helped too, didn't I?"

"You sure did!" Fenton Hardy laughed, throwing his arm around the boy. "Chet gave me your message," he told his sons, "and brought me to the camp. That's how we discovered the tunnel was exposed."

Joe sighed. "Well, I guess this winds up another mystery," he said.

"Don't take it so hard," Frank comforted him with a grin. "Another one will turn up soon!"

And although he did not realize it at the time, Frank was speaking the truth. For the Hardy boys were closer to the mystery of the "Sign of the Crooked Arrow" than they knew.

Now, standing on the crest of Skull Mountain, the boys, their father and their friends stared down at Tarnack Valley.

The scar which the rockslide had left on the mountainside stood out raw against the green of the 212 The Secret of Skull Mountain foliage. Soon it, too, would be covered with trees and bushes once more. But long before that, the mouth of the prehistoric tunnel would have been walled up forever. Then the thin sheet of water which now covered the valley would rise and become a deep lake.

Bob smiled happily as he pictured it.

"Teii the folks in Bayporl to start turning on their faucets," he told the Hardy boys with a grin. "From now on, tiiere's going to be plenty of water for Saturday baths!"